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*The Thistles of the Baragan*

PANAÏT ISTRATI

# THE THISTLES OF THE BARAGAN

*By the Author of "The Bandits," "Kyra Kyralina," "Uncle Anghel"*

*Translated from the French by Jacques Le Clercq*

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*I dedicate this book*
*To the Roumanian people;*
*To its eleven thousand sons murdered by the Roumanian government;*
*To the three villages of Stanilesti, Baïlesti, Hadivoaïa, razed to the ground by cannon;*
*These crimes perpetrated in March, nineteen hundred and seven, and still unpunished.*

PANAÏT ISTRATI
*March, 1928*

*The Thistles of the Baragan*

## CHAPTER ONE

WHEN September dawns, for one month the vast, wild plains of Danubian Walachia settle down to their millenary existence.

It begins exactly on Saint Pantelimon's Day. That day, the Crivets, the bitter northeast wind which sweeps over South Russia, blows icily over the endless steppes; but as the earth is still scorching, the gale breaks its teeth. Yet the warning has been sounded; stork and man have but to act.

The stork, lately grown wistful, turns its red eyes upon this hand caressing it against the grain, and wings away to more equable climes. Among my people, the stork is highly respected, even feared; "it sets fire to the cottage," runs the rune, "if ever one disturb its nest." Its de-

parture, therefore—a departure expected and watched for by the man of Braïla or Ialomitza—marks the end of human mastery over God's earth.

The peasant, having followed to infinity the bird's flight, crams his bonnet over his ears; coughs a little, as if through habit; kicks aside his dog, which has crept between his legs, and shuffles back into the house.

"The children ought to begin picking up firewood now!"

At these gloomy words, wife and little ones cough a little and, from habit, shudder in their turn.

"Stork's gone, eh? . . ."

"Ay, gone . . ."

Then the Steppes of the Baragan assume complete mastery.

At first the Baragan does so passively, like a man who lies down, buries his face in the ground and refuses either to rise or die. The Baragan is a giant!

Stretched out, since all eternity, over all the sun-scorched lands between the woeful Ialomitza and the grumbling Danube, the Baragan wages a sly war, throughout spring and summer, against the hard-working peasant. It loves him not; indeed, it refuses him any comfort other than that of strolling about and howling. For this reason, everywhere in Roumania, when a man is taking too many liberties in public:

"Hi, there!" the cry goes up, "where do you think you are: on the Baragan?"

For the Baragan is solitude itself. Never a tree on its back; and between one well and the next, a man has time aplenty to die of thirst. Nor is it any business of the Baragan's to shield you from hunger, either. But if you are armed against these twin ailments of the flesh, and if you wish to walk alone with your God, go out on the Baragan; it is precisely the place the Creator allotted to Walachia for the Roumanian to dream away in at his leisure.

A bird flying between two chains of mountains

is a thing to wring your heart. On the Baragan, the same bird, flying, bears off earth and the distant horizons in its flight. You lie flat on your back, you feel the earthen platter rising, soaring toward the zenith. This is the noblest flight that a man who possesses literally nothing can accomplish.

This fact gives those who dwell on the Baragan a rather grave character. And although these men know, on occasion, how to laugh joyfully, they much prefer to listen deferentially. That is because their lives are hard and because they live in the hope that someone may appear to teach them what to do so as to wrest the best possible advantages from their steppes.

Dreams, meditation, aspiration and a hollow belly are what give a man gravity who is born on the Baragan, on that immensity which secretes water in the inmost depths of its bowels, on that immensity whither nothing comes, nothing except the thistles. . . .

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* *

These thistles, of course, are not of the kind which grow like corn and bear a fine, red, downy flower for the girls of my country to trim on Saint Toader's Night, as they sing:

*"May the lasses' tresses of hair, of hair*
*Grow thick, grow strong as the tail of a mare!"*

No, these thistles appear, as soon as the snows melt, in the shape of small balls, somewhat like mushrooms or morils. In less than a week, they have invaded the earth; it is all that the Baragan can bear upon its back. To be sure, it also bears sheep, which delight in this thistle and feed on it avidly. But the more they browse, the greater the thistles become; they grow on, always ball-shaped, until they reach the size of a fat demi-john. Then their growth stops and the cattle leave them strictly alone, for then they prick horribly. These evil weeds are at no loss to protect themselves. They are in every way like human dregs: the more useless, the better they can defend themselves.

And yet, what knowledge do we possess of the useful and the useless?

So long as the man of Ialomitza puts up a fight and persists doggedly in wresting a handful of corn or a few potatoes from his soil, the Baragan is uninteresting. It is not worth visiting; it is a bastard thing, like a beautiful woman clad in rags, or a slattern arrayed in diamonds. Earth has not been granted to man merely for him to feed his belly; there are places in the world destined for contemplation.

Of such is the Baragan.

Its reign begins the moment the plodding worker returns home and the thistles turn evil and the wind blows down from Russia. This happens in September.

Then it is that at wide intervals a shepherd may be seen, his back turned on the North, lingering, belated, so his flock may pasture. He leans on his crook, motionless; the wind sweeps upon him, moves him from side to side, makes

him sway as though he were a wooden figure. All about him, far as the eye can travel, there are only thistles, numberless multitudes of thistles. Rich they are, and thick; they are like endless flocks of sheep whose wool might be of steel. All is thorn and seed; seed to spread over the face of the earth and to raise thistles—nothing but thistles.

Like the shepherd, they also sway; it is through the compact mass of the thistles that the Muscovy wind blows most doggedly, whilst the Baragan listens, and a sky of lead crushes the earth, and the birds fly off, lost. . . .

And so it goes for a whole mortal week. The wind blows, blows. The thistles stand their ground, though their crests bow, sway, to right and left. Now their funnels hang down from a stalk no thicker than your little finger. The thistles still resist—a little—ever so slightly. But never the shepherd! The shepherd leaves God's thanklessness to God; and he goes home. That is when we cry:

"The game is up! That is the Baragan!"
And God, how beautiful it is!

Plunging headlong like a runaway horse, the Crivets gallops over the land of the thistles, overturns sky and earth, mingles the clouds with the dust, annihilates the birds. And then, then it is the thistles move, rise, blow, fly away to scatter their evil seed.

Cut at its root, the short stem breaks off clean. By the thousands, the prickly balls begin to roll across the earth. This is the great exodus of the thistles. "They come," say the old men who watch them from their windows, "God knows from where and they go God knows whither."

Of course, they do not all leave at once. Some there are scamper off at the first angry blast, a veritable avalanche of mauve-grey sheep. Others are more obstinate; they cling to earth. But the flying thistles grapple these in their mad cavalcade, drag them off their stems, sweep them forward.

They join and mingle; soon they are agglomerated in vast, irregularly-shaped balls of snow that roll bumping over the earth until, with one furious blast, the wind pierces the mass, raises its elements into the air, blasts them into a devil's rigadoon and pushes them forward, ever forward.

It is then that the Baragan bears seeing. It looks as though it were rolling into a hump, then flattening itself out again, at will, exulting at all this world storming furiously over its back while the Crivets bellows with rage. Now and again, during a lull, it lies low, to feel the passage of three or four thistles which gallop like a pack of schoolboys, jostle one another friendly-wise, pace each other for the sport of it, but hasten back into proper alignment and set out again, neck to neck.

Towards the end of the crisis, there are the solitary thistles. These are best loved, because most keenly awaited. Either because their stems were not dry enough to snap off at the outset, or

because they may have been lucklessly swallowed up for a moment in the abyss of some ravine, or, finally, because some urchin caught them and stopped them in their headlong rush, they are late, poor children! And they dash by, one by one, like little boys, late for school. Sky and Baragan watch them pass; they are the solitary, the best loved.

Suddenly, all life comes to a halt. The vast steppe shines clean as the flagstones in a royal palace.

Then the Baragan dons its white fur and settles down to a slumber of six months.

And the thistles?

The thistles go rolling on. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

It is an almost incredible story, for its roots are deep in our Roumanian earth. But I must begin at the beginning.

Though marsh-dwellers at Laténi, on the Borcéa river—that daughter of the Danube which makes bold to rival its father—I am not autochthonously of Ialomitza. My parents, both of them Oltlanders and poor as Job, set forth into the world when I was two years old. What more need I say? After myriad peregrinations through twenty districts, they threw down bag and baggage (myself, who was then no higher than a boot) into the hamlet of Laténi, hard by the Danube.

This may seem strange, but it is a fact. My parents were not the sort to be driven to slave's

work, as cattle are driven to the slaughterhouse, especially my father, a wistful, dreamy man who forgot his own name as he blew into his flute. Indeed, so thoroughly did he lose himself in his music that he had been known actually to fall in a faint, exhausted by hunger. And at Laténi, at least, we had fish under our very hands. It would jump into the saucepan of its own accord, as it were; things went of themselves.

In the spring and autumn, the Borcéa covered with its yellow waters several hundreds of acres of fallow land; in that infinite waste of water, the pike, the small carp, and the common crucian were so thick that the very cats stood by the edge of the puddles, gorging themselves. As for us, we fished with the large two-handled tin buckets in which the laundry was generally boiled. Those fish were a true manna from heaven. Men, women and children, bare up to the thigh, with our bags slung around our necks, scattered out like skirmishers, moved forward across the swamped countryside, each equipped

with his old tin bucket completely staved in. The water was never more than knee-deep. As we splashed about, the fish knocked against our knees, but they were small fry and we wanted only bigger catch. We knew the larger fish liked to nibble at the base of the tall plants, the heads of which rose over the surface of the water. So we stood motionless, our glances riveted on these plants. Then, as soon as the plants moved, smack! Down went our tin buckets about them. We could hear the fish colliding against the sides of the buckets; all we need do was to pick our catch up in our hands and throw it into our bags. A man had to be clumsy indeed to miss his prey.

My father, however, missed his regularly, to the great delight of the urchins. They mocked and jeered at him, but he did not care at all; he blithely went on falling over the plants about him, bucket and all, whether they moved or no. After an hour's fishing, we returned home with our bags teeming with fish. As for my father, he never brought back even a minnow. Seeing this,

my blessed mother urged him to stay at home, to salt the fish, to do the washing, to cook supper, and to play his flute.

This humiliated me to the point of tears: after all, laundering and cooking are not a man's job. But there was nothing essentially virile in my father: he was a gentle woman, with great black moustaches and deep languorous eyes constantly resting on his flute, from which, with his knotty fingers, he drew poignant melodies that echoed far abroad, making the dogs bark through the silent nights. On the other hand, when he cooked a soup or a fish stew, or when he did the washing, the best housewives could have learned something from him. Alas, this did not prevent them from mocking him, for a man simply cannot devote himself to a woman's work.

When this happened, I felt like fighting against the whole hamlet, since my poor father never took up an insult, but rather bore it all quite stoically. Smiling ever so slightly, he would go off to the river, with his pointed cap always over the nape

of his long neck, his ragged trousers always slipping down, his sandals dragging behind him, and his wonderful flute which never failed to console him amid this pitiful, so tragically beautiful life.

Sometimes I followed him; only sometimes, and in secret, for he loved to be alone. In the mild evenings, when the stillness mingled with the odor of the mud, I knew he was seated on the trunk of some uprooted willow. Then, after a plaint that robbed me of my very breath, I could hear him singing, in a discreet, true voice and very softly, that unforgettable song of Oltland:

*"O the hyssop leaf is green!*
*Ha, la, la!*
*The Oltlanders are gone, gone*
*for the mowing, gone,*
*Leaving the women of Oltland*
*at home, alone*
*In tavern and wineshop and inn,*
*But the Oltlanders are gone . . ."*

Ay, the men of Oltland are always off "for the mowing", always off to accomplish a thousand other tasks, leaving their women at home to "fill the taverns"—which is not, however, absolutely true. But my father had not done this; when he left, he took his woman of Oltland and their treasure (myself) with him. That was why my mother loved him so dearly. While we fished together, when I caught sight of her horrible varicose veins and asked her why she left the easiest tasks to my father:

"Because I love him, my child . . . God made him as he is and gave him to me for a husband. . . . It's no fault of his, poor man!"

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* *

That is how we used to live at Laténi.

I was then nine years old. With my mother, who never admitted that she was tired, I used always to go fishing, both during the floods, when the carp came knocking at our door, and

during the rest of the year, when we had to fetch it out of the Borcéa.

There it was no longer a case of fishing with the bucket, but with all the complicated nets and gear and tackle of your professional fisherfolk.

Only one who has seen that woman fishing can possibly appreciate what a wife of Oltland is who loves her husband. Especially when she cast the large net about her. There she stood, her arms bared to the shoulders; her dress drawn up very high; her hair caught together and bound up in her kerchief; her mouth, her eyes, her nose, reaching out towards the marshy infinite; she looked as though about to draw in all the fish that swim in the Borcéa.

"Hurrah for the female!" the fishermen cried, as they watched her at work.

Nevertheless, our situation continued to be precarious. What, after all, is the use of wearing oneself out in this world? Work leads to nowhere.

While my mother and I fished—I caught my

share, too—my father was at home, salting away with all his might, filling up the washtubs, hanging up the dried fish, after it was properly salted, and preparing it for the market.

For market. . . . And may the Lord preserve you from such marketing! We received between fifty cents and one dollar per hundred pounds of fish, delivered wholesale and on the spot to the rapacious jobbers. At that, we were glad enough to be able to get rid of it, for we did not know where to keep it any longer. It crushed, rotted, and stank us out of house and home, after we had had to flounder about ankle-deep in its guts during the salting season. Yes, from fifty cents to one dollar per hundred pounds. We worked only for the State, only to buy tons of salt, a State monopoly. And we never earned enough to buy the merest rag or an ounce of flour. Then, as all that fish went bad, we would have to throw it back into the Borcéa, back into the waters whence my mother had drawn it so valiantly and with such great hopes for the future.

No, the proverb was right that said:

*"Lads, it's a fine land, ours,*
*But a wretched rule, lasses,*
*Damn the State powers,*
*The governing classes!"*

Ay, so it was: a fine, rich land, but organized and governed abominably. My mother, like every other Roumanian peasant, knew this quite well.

During the long years she had wandered across Walachia from end to end, she had been afforded a thousand opportunities of judging the wretched existence of the peasants in those parts, who, too far distant from a river to buy fish and too poor to buy meat, lived on meal porridge and vegetables, at a cost, on the average, of three and a half cents per day, whilst, in the meantime, all along the hundreds of miles beside the Danube, its arms and its tributaries, thousands of pounds of fish were rotting away, useless for want of transportation. Here, then, was manna from heaven unavailable because three-quarters of the

country has only those same facilities of communication to-day that they did a thousand years ago.

Pondering this, one day, my mother had an inspiration which she began to execute without letting us into the secret. By steeling herself to sly economies, by filling us up with fish and nothing else (seldom a little meal porridge, even more seldom a crumb of bread) for one mortal year, she managed to save twenty dollars which enabled her to buy, at a bargain, a nag and a wagon, two of the wheels of which were wobbling and about to crumble.

"There!" she said to my father. "You and the child can go in this from village to village and sell salted fish. . . ."

"Go in that?" My father grew pale, sighed, "Cross the Baragan in that?" He eyed the emaciated horse, the disjointed wagon.

"Do you want to come along, lad?" he asked me.

What a question! Not only was I willing; I

was delighted. A chance to see the Baragan, that dream every child nourishes, that land "that knows no master!" And, best of all, a chance at last for me, too, to chase its thistles, about which I had heard such wondrous tales, to run with all the running wind-flung earth.

"Why not try?" I said gravely, controlling my joy. "What do we stand to lose?"

"Good Lord, the nag, first, then the wagon, and lastly ourselves. The Baragan will swallow us up!"

The Baragan! Swallow us up! It made me shudder. Oh, but yes, I did want to go. I did, I did!

On the morrow, at dawn, we set out, equipped with the bare, the piteous essentials. My blessed mother, tearful, faltering, feeling as though she had sent us to our deaths, accompanied us on foot all the way to the threshold to the Baragan, far beyond the National Highway which, mistrusting the wasteland and following the Borcéa, goes from Braïla to Calarashi. There she em-

braced us, her face bathed in tears and furrowed with wrinkles, though she was less than thirty-five years old. Fondly, too, she stroked the horse, which she was never to see again; and she shook one wheel of the wagon to convince herself of its fragility. Nor was she ever to see the wagon again, either.

In the milky, greyish light of morning, our black silhouettes loomed flat against the adjacent steppe. Under the rainy, summer sky, the rooks cawed dismally. Cap in hand, my father took up the cords we used for reins and crossed himself:

"God be with us!"

"God be with us!"

So the Baragan swallowed us up, but my father, refusing to take fright, blew a heartrending trill on his flute to accompany the words:

*"The Oltlanders are gone, gone . . ."*

Thus it was that we left my poor mother.

## CHAPTER THREE

OVER six hundred pounds of fish, piled up in the back of the wagon; the scales to weigh the fish hung from the tilt; a sack of corn flour; a saucepan to boil the meal porridge in; a trivet; a bagful of onions; a wallet to hold such money as we would pick up and a stout staff to defend it, if we had to—such was our entire fortune.

We started afoot, lost, as though on a sea, between heaven and earth. The horse followed us, wheezing.

"If you had not wished to come along, I would never have set out, no, that I wouldn't, not for anything in the world. . . ."

These words, the first my father spoke to me suddenly in the midst of this solitude, I shall never forget so long as I still draw breath. They

have pursued me since; and they shall pursue me all my life long. So the person responsible for this adventure was I, I, a lad of fourteen. . . ?

If I had not wished to come along. . . .

Without answering a word—for my father had spoken solely to break the silence—I went behind the wagon. Looking down and forward under it, I could see the horse bury its hoofs in the sandy earth, its hairy old feet rising, then coming down again, painfully; whilst the greasing-tackle swung to and fro between the axles. I saw this for a moment; then I suddenly felt myself carried away, as the sun, darting upward in the heavens, cast its wreath of dazzling rays over our solitude. The myriads of fat thistles were suddenly filled with violet and purple diamonds, which I touched with my finger and with the end of my tongue, while my father and the horse moved off slowly, turning their backs on the East. Field mice, polecats and weasels took to their holes, terrified. They were almost as numerous as the grasshoppers, which made me

regret that our dog was not along with us. What a treat these little beasts would have been for him, satiated as he was with eating only fish, exactly as his masters did. Then I would have found a blessed companion in him, just as my father had in his flute. But my mother had advised us to give up this animal, for he would slobber over us as we ate our meal porridge. Besides, my father was a light sleeper and on the Baragan there were almost no travellers, much less evil-doers.

And yet how much I missed Bruin! I thirsted for solitude and long journeys, but I would have wished to be in good company. For years now, intent on eternally fishing and powerless to break away, I had watched my friends scampering away with the Crivets and the thistles, each beautiful September. Where were they off to? What adventures were happening to them? What sights were they seeing? Certain among them never returned to their homes; people would say that so and so had "gone astray". Another had

pushed as far as the home of some well-to-do kinsman and had had himself adopted. How had he managed it? How could one "go astray", and get oneself adopted? It was with such an end in view that I had jumped at the chance of accompanying my father. I was tall and sturdy; I had young, strong legs. And I, too, longed to run off with the wind and the thistles, to go astray or to get myself adopted, but above all, to leave my home, to rush off, to escape from this water which rotted my legs and this fish we piled up to no purpose.

Now here the thistles were at my feet, beautiful as great boxtrees, numberless as the stars, fleshy, bursting with sap, but motionless. They did not budge, for this was in early August. Would I be running away with them a month from now? Would I know whither they lead a lad, where they go off to? Most of them, I knew, ended in some peasant's stove, a crackling flame. But the others? Those which "start

things going"? What countries did they lay before the eyes of the lad galloping along with them? How did they happen to change a lad's fate?

Ah, how I longed to talk to someone who would tell me the wildest tales, who might lie outright to me, but who would give me to dream a little and to dare! And the thistles were all dream and daring, an invitation to exchange what a man possessed for what he might possess, even for the worst, since nothing can be sorrier for those who love earth than stagnation.

The Baragan, which was said to be "endless", stood for "all earth" in the eyes of us children. It was a desert, it was barren and perilous, that we well knew; yet had it not been by setting off one fine day with the thistles, never to return again, that Mateï, poor old Brosteanu's son, had become one of the leading hardware merchants of Bucharest?

I confess that I myself did not dream of the slightest grandeur. I dreamed, that was all. I

rebelled against all that malodorous fish, against that torpor of viscous puddles and against my own parents, who, for their part, seemed eager to bequeath me their own shabby lot. I knew no destiny sadder, not even that of an itinerant petrol merchant, whose very bread, as he ate it, took on the odor of his merchandise. But he, at least, did eat bread every day, while we tasted it only one Sunday out of four. And to think that when they settled down by the Borcéa, my parents were happy to note the abundance of fish.

"Here at least there is fish!" they cried.

Indeed, there was so much of it that it finally drove my father and me off and then killed my mother.

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For a whole week we went forward without seeing a living soul. One day, as we hit the Marculesti road, which cuts the Baragan vertically, my father said:

"We can't possibly go any farther with all this fish. We must get rid of part of it."

"What? Throw it away?"

"No—but almost! A great many people travel on this road; we'll try to sell some to the peasants who come to gather the corn; if we can get two dollars per hundred pounds, it's at least that much to the good."

I recalled my mother's reckoning:

"You can sell it at about four or five cents per pound, so that when you return, you will have paid for the horse and wagon and netted a slight profit."

I could tell now what profit we were going to make out of this first and last journey, as I looked at our horse's lifeless eyes, at the terribly drawn face of my father. As for the wagon, it was going the way of the rest; a few more dog-days and it would be a heap of waste wood and scrap iron. For the last two days now, its wheels held on only because we constantly patched them up, while the horse reeled and tottered at every hun-

dred paces. Then we would have to pull him up by the tail to set him on his feet again. This fashion of crossing the Baragan plunged my father into a desperate silence which frightened me more and more every day, as I remembered the words he had spoken the morning we set out.

I would have been happy indeed to disappear, to clear out for good. My father's silence was so sinister, so like the silence of the Baragan, broken alone by the piercing cries of the osprey and the bare-necked vulture, whose nests were buried in the infinite succession of hillocks outlined against the distant horizon. The apparition of these birds of prey soaring over our heads kept me close upon my father's heels. I did not fear the vultures, which were cowardly and contented themselves with devouring some carcass thrown out on the pasture-land; but I was in terror of the ospreys, which were said to attack flocks of sheep and sometimes even fly away with a lamb in their talons.

This terror was not absolutely depressing. Had I had a merry comrade at my side and a gun in my hand, I would have even discovered that mine was an heroic soul that dreamed of perils and feats of valor. But Lord! how pitiful to struggle against the Baragan, where everything is peril and valor, beside a man crushed by life.

Dogging his heels through this infinity that teemed with fabulous stories, I often wondered about this father of mine whom nothing interested save his flute. I had never seen him embrace my mother; and, when we came to Laténi, he caressed me only very seldom. Indeed, I knew no more about him than I did about our horse, perhaps even less.

Such was the lamentable company in which, at the age of fourteen, I dared set out as an heroic conqueror, into the kingdom of those thistles which "start things going."

It was noon when we halted on the Marculesti road. The horse, unharnessed, swayed, tottering

to right and left, to browse grass; but, too horribly thirsty, it fell flat on its belly and did not move. We tried to set it up on its feet again, to lead it to the well, the arch of which we saw at the end of the road. But we could not in any way raise the animal and we had to fetch water ourselves and comfort it where it lay. Then we lunched, as usual, in the shadow of the wagon, on good porridge and the eternal fish stew and peppers.

While he ate, father kept scanning the horizon, where he hoped to see some peasant cart. Towards the end of the meal, a vehicle appeared: a fine carriage coming up at a swift trot, raising a cloud of dust. Its naves rang like bells. Two spanking mares, richly harnessed, drew it forward, caracoling up the road.

The man was a parvenu gypsy, one of those blacksmith-wheelwrights, who possess fine, fertile lands, worked by wretches like ourselves.

"Ho, ho, ho-oh!" he yelled as he stopped with a flourish of his whip, rolling eyes that tried

to be ferocious and baring all his milk-white teeth in a snigger.

Before all this swagger, my father lowered his head, humbly.

"Good morning, Rumani!" cried the gypsy. "What are you selling there, watermelons?"

"No, half-salted fish."

"What sort of fish?"

"Medium-sized carp."

"No worms in your carp?"

"If you find any worms, you needn't buy from me."

"Depends on the price. And why shouldn't I buy from you, worms or no? Am *I* going to eat it? Pouah!"

Thereupon he alighted, knotted his reins to one wheel and came to rummage in our wagon. He turned the fish in every direction, opened its gills wide, dug his nose into it, even bit into it, then:

"Your carps have no worms in them yet, but they won't keep long. How big a load have you?"

"Six hundred pounds."

"What price?"

"Two dollars per hundred pounds, just to get rid of them."

"What if I take half the load off your hands? Will you give it to me cheaper?"

"Not a cent less," said my father, disappointed.

Swelling out his silver-laced chest: "How silly you are!" the gypsy cried. "Where do you hope to go and sell your fish, with that old lumber and your half-dead nag?"

As he said this, he dealt the beast, still supine, a vigorous kick. At this insult, my father clenched his teeth, seized his cudgel, and advanced on the gypsy, who retreated to his carriage:

"Why did you kick my beast, you filthy nigger! Did I ever ask you to buy fish of me? Did I even so much as bid you good-day? I'll beat your brains out with this cudgel!"

The other, grown pale, at once retracted:

"Oh, ay; you're right, my friend! But you know that I'd not be a gypsy if I were different: it's a bad habit always trying to show off. Come along, forgive me my insolence and allow me to drink your health! When that's done, we shall weigh out three hundred pounds of your carp, at the price you mentioned."

My father pondered a moment, then accepted a glass, indeed several. I had my share too. Then we weighed out fifteen times twenty pounds of fish at honest measure. My father crammed the six dollars into his wallet, they had another drink together and bid each other a cordial farewell.

And the wagon, lightened of half its load, set off again at the hour of vespers along its invisible road across the Baragan.

## CHAPTER FOUR

We did not go very far—at most six miles. But the horse and wagon were in such a state that it took us over two days to cover this distance. Then, suddenly, without warning, both collapsed at the same time, utterly worn out.

In one jolt three wheels fell from the wagon and crumbled to pieces, the frame crushing in their fall. As the sun went down, pouring molten gold over the steppe, the horse died, the litter surrounding us and our tragic faces. The poor beast gave up its soul without any pain, happy, perhaps, to be done with life. As he took off its harness, my father looked down at the carcass.

"God is my witness that I did not make it suffer," he said. "I ran a good mile to fetch it water; it never lacked grass; and as for a whip,

I have none. If it is dead at my hands, may God forgive me, but I am in no way to blame."

He made the sign of the cross and a genuflexion, facing that east from which he had set forth quite without hope.

We spent the night near the dead horse, keeping silence for a long time before we fell asleep to the heart-rending music of the joyous crickets. On the morrow, at daybreak, crows, rooks and ravens were upon us, cawing and croaking horribly. We hastened to abandon the carcass and the remnants of the wagon to them. My father boiled a good meal porridge for the journey, filled the saucepan with fish, made himself a bag out of an almost empty sack of corn and put the water-jar in it. I took up the blankets and the trivet.

As we set out my father said, just as he had said when we left Laténi:

"God be with us!"

My mother was not there now to answer him. He did not play his flute any more.

Towards noon that day, as we hit the road to Calarashi, a great wind blew up from the south-east.

"There's the Baltarets, the South Wind!" my father said, "it's the forerunner of the Crivets. Summer is over. And you can soon be galloping away after the thistles if you feel like it."

Then, seeing that I was gazing at the thistles with a sort of delirium, he added:

"Besides, I know that was what urged you to venture into the maw of the Baragan. Now the mischief is done: the pair of us can gallop away together."

"Are we going back to Laténi?" I asked.

"We are going to Calarashi first; that is the capital of the district. You know the song:

*"Traders, petty traders,*
*It's off we be*
*To the market*
*Of Calarashi. . . ."*

A sparkle of joy illumined my poor father's

wretched face. Quickly I kissed his hand. He stroked my cheeks:

"Let us forget evil, lad. . . . We live here below solely to expiate. . . . Expiation: that's what life means. . . . But the Lord will take account of it."

After two days' walking on a good road, we at last reached Calarashi, where the Borcéa quarrels with the Danube and storms away in a huff for seventy-five miles as far as Hârsova, where it returns to its cradle again. At Calarashi, for the first time I saw a town with paved streets, with houses built upon other houses and with crowds of people jostling each other, as at market. In the courtyards of the rich, there were great piles of beach and willow, split and lined up like sleepers. Seeing this, my father bought a saw and axe, made himself a horse, and in less than no time we went shouting "Sawyers, Sawyers!" through these courtyards.

We were everywhere well received; we worked for all prices, always by the job. My father asked double prices, for, he said, the rich bar-

gained like gypsies, but it was always possible to reach an agreement in the end. And my poor father sweated away at his work, from dawn to dusk. I also toiled, helping him as best I could. Thus we managed to earn nearly two dollars a day on the average, an unheard-of sum.

"We've got to do it, my lad," my father told me. "We've got to bring home the twenty dollars that are lying out in the Baragan. Otherwise your mother would die of sorrow."

So I sawed away manfully and ate bread and cheese while I did so. Bread! How happy I was to be able to eat bread. Bread was very cake compared with our eternal fish at Laténi.

In the evening, limp with fatigue, we used to treat ourselves to a good stuffed cabbage in an inn by the grain market; the host, knowing my parents, allowed us to sleep free of charge in some odd corner of a barn. But my father never failed to buy a quart of wine daily, in order not to seem too niggardly. So things went for a whole week. Yet another week, with plenty of

work for us, and we would be setting out again for Laténi, bringing her money back to my mother. There were quite a few peasants with wagons and carts who offered to take us as far as Fétesti and beyond.

And, indeed, this happened. We left before we had even begun that second week's work. But we did not go to meet my blessed mother. She was dead.

*

* *

We had no inkling of anything amiss that evening at the inn when Gravila Spânn from Facaéni came in, covered with dust, his whip tucked under his arm, and said to my father with his usual jollity:

"So that's it, Marine, eh! Treating yourself to a stuffed cabbage and your wife Anica . . ."

"Yes, I know, I know," my father said, as he shook hands with Gravila, "Anica is impatiently waiting for us. . . . But we had bad luck cross-

ing that cursed Baragan. Sit down and tell us a bit how things are going at home."

Gravila sat down, at my right, looked strangely at my father, who was facing him, removed his cap, and spat:

"Bring me a measure of brandy!" he cried to the host.

As he raised his own glass, without saying a word, he reached to one side and first spilled a few drops on to the floor. According to the Orthodox rites, this solemn gesture is made only with the intention of saluting the memory of a person deceased whose name has come up in the conversation. Seeing him do this, my father lifted his own glass of wine and wished, in his turn, to sprinkle the ground. But his glance remained glued to Gravila, as though to ask whom he had in mind. The peasant vouchsafed no answer. Casting a furtive glance at me, he twisted his moustache and I saw him making a sign to my father and raising his eyebrows.

I understood. I burst into tears. Then, re-

lieved, Gravila told the story briefly, while I wept into my hands:

"Ay, she passed away, poor woman. . . . She stuck her finger with a bone while scaling a fish. . . . Nothing at all, you might have thought, a tiny scratch. . . . But in less than a week she had blood-poisoning. So she came to me at Facaéni. . . . As I was to leave next day with a load for Calarashi, my wife made her spend the night at our house and we set out at daybreak. She screamed all the way along the road; she never closed her eyes for a second. We got here the day before yesterday; we drove straight to the hospital door. During the night she gave up the ghost. Yesterday they pickled and buried her."

After a pause, the man added:

"Anica asked your forgiveness and she forgave you."

"Ay, may God forgive her!" said my father, scattering a few drops of wine.

"We shall all follow her one day," Gravila said in conclusion.

And he put down close to my father's plate a great kerchief my mother used to wear around her head when she went fishing:

"Her pennies," he said. "A couple of dollars, I think she told me."

His haggard eyes fixed on the table, my father murmured:

"Cursed Baragan! . . . And that cursed fish. . . . O Lord, how bitter it is to tread this Calvary to the end of life!"

"May Earth lie lightly on her!" Gravila said, clinking glasses with my father. Then:

"What bad luck did you tell me you had on the Baragan?"

"The horse—dead; the cart in splinters; our fish, lost!"

"Is that all? Good Lord, good Lord! And now?"

"We've been sawing wood for the last week. . . . And I thought we too were to be allowed to eat a stuffed cabbage, for we've worked hard . . . hard. . . ."

Two days after this tragic evening, we left with Gravila, who was going back home. And we . . . ? Where were we bound for? With Laténi, at all events, neither my father nor I wished to have any further dealings. We had not told each other this but it could be read on our faces. Yet when our neighbor offered us a lift, we climbed into his wagon. For we had lost all sense of will. We accompanied him, I believe, because we feared to be alone.

A three days' journey in complete silence followed. There were lengthy halts with no sound but the wheezing of the horses. Three days we travelled over a good road, following the Borcéa through the Baragan, which was calling me, which wanted me, which promised me everything that I could not find between this father of mine and this Gravila whose silence made my head reel. They sat in front, I behind; and I watched their bent backs. From time to time, a carter crossed us.

"Good day to you!" he would say.

"We thank you!" the two taciturn men would answer.

That was all. A creaking of axles, the monotonous rumble of the wheels, a heaven and earth without beginning or end or hope. A long road lay behind us; another, quite as long, quite as tedious, lay ahead, like a dead scarf leading a man by the tip of his nose.

Then, suddenly, on the third day of our journey, towards evening, far away in the distance we sighted a huge dog, standing on his back paws, his ears perked, looking hopefully at the middle of the road. I was certain it was my Bruin; I leaped out of the wagon and ran towards him while he in turn sprang at me; we bumped into each other and rolled in the dust together, he biting playfully at me and urinating on my bare legs before letting me go, then jumping on my father's back while the latter pressed him against his breast.

There we were a half-mile from home. Then my father said to Gravila:

"You see, brother, not even the dog will have anything to do with that house. Take all there is in it; we're not going back there. We're going out in the world, I, the lad and the dog. Let it be yours, then, Gravila, this house that is now womanless."

Standing up in his wagon, Gravila pondered for a moment, nibbling away at an end of his moustache:

"You are right, Marine," he says, "A man without land or wife is good for nothing. Go out, then, into the world. And here are six dollars for the wood I shall get out of your house."

Then pointing to me with his whip, he added:

"The lad seems to be a wild one. Keep an eye on him when it's thistle-time. He's not beyond giving you the slip, Marine. Marry him off the day he's eighteen; give him a wife with a bit of land of her own and let him potter around about their hearth."

"I shall do no such thing," my father cried, "it is God's to command . . ."

Gravila shrugged his shoulders and resumed his journey.

We stayed in the middle of the deserted road with our bags and tools and provisions and Bruin, the dog, who looked at us as though to ask what we intended to do.

For a long time, firm and motionless as a stake, my father, dazed, contemplated Laténi and that horizon where, for eight years, he had gutted fish and hoped. Then, for the first time, I remembered his words, uttered like a blasphemy in the middle of the Baragan:

"If you had not wished to come along, I would never have set out, no, that I wouldn't; not for anything in the world."

The vespers rang from a church in the distance when we hit the road again, bound for Ialomitza, for the North, for other lands. The sea of thistles rose and fell, the crests of its waves blazing in the sunset; the hills, with their bald, rounded knolls, watched over the wasteland. Cranes and

storks wheeled circlewise across the limpid sky in their dance of farewell, which always takes place shortly before they fly away. The nape of my neck ached as I bent back my head to watch them and my heart was heavy within me for knowing that I was riveted to the ground.

Bruin walked ahead of me, snapping at flies. My father, far in the lead, was playing on the flute he had so long forgotten:

*"The Oltlanders are gone . . . gone . . ."*

## CHAPTER FIVE

On both sides of the Ialomitza the land is fertile, the farms numerous. There the Baragan gnaws with broken teeth.

For three days we wandered from Hagiéni to Platonesti, looking for a position as farm-hands, but we were turned away wherever we applied. Finally, in utter exhaustion, we drifted one evening to a wretched farm which received us. It was a ramshackle building, a shabby manor with little live-stock and less agriculture, lying a mile from the village. The Baragan was already encroaching upon it with its fierce all-devouring drought; and the farm, isolated in those dreary wastes, was slowly succumbing to the ogre-like advances of those untenanted spaces.

As we approached it, the smell of boiling

porridge tickled our nostrils and set Bruin's tail wagging. The farm-yard was alive with men, women and children, moving in every direction, and the poultry were picking their way, with near-sighted precautions, to their perches.

We were met by the housekeeper, a woman with a determined face and an urban manner, with a great bunch of keys dangling at her waist. She questioned us briefly and then, turning to an upper window, cried:

"Hey, Miss, Miss! Doudouca!"

On the balcony appeared a spinster, tall, white-haired, nobly wrinkled, very thin but very erect. Silencing the dogs at our heels, she asked:

"What is it, Marie?"

"Strangers, miss. Two hungry mouths asking for bed and work, if possible."

"Come up," said the spinster, leaning over the balcony.

Leaving Bruin below, we climbed to the balcony, hats in hand. The lady considered us with great tender eyes, which warmed my heart. In

reply to her brief questions, my father told her our story.

"Poor devils," she murmured.

She wore a black dress of an old-fashioned cut which gave her an appearance of severity, but the kindliness of her voice dispelled every impression of harshness.

"And you have a dog, too?" she sighed.

"Must we kill him?" asked my father.

"No. Dogs feed themselves. You may stay. Since you know so much about fish, you may do some salting for the farm."

"There!" said my father, as we retired. "Those damned fish! We'll be salting them for the rest of our days."

His face fell. We saw ourselves slipping back into the life we had just fled: the sickening slobber of guts, the salt smarting in every scratch, the scales spurting in our eyes, the dangerous bones that poison the blood—all that life of Laténi which we knew so well.

At that very moment, as if to confirm our fears, the yard filled with the dense yellow smoke of salt fish baking for supper. And what fish! Little pike and the measly black carp we called "tubercular scum," shovelled up out of stench and slime! Bruin ate better than that in Laténi.

By the time we sat down to table, we discovered that we could hope for no better here. About the saucepan, on which the porridge was boiling, bony children were dancing a famished round, clutching the drops of juice that leapt on the stirring-stick. They burned their fingers, but they returned again and again, undeterred, and licked their fingers as if it were honey. Others pilfered the half-dried corn-spikes and grilled them with infinite ingenuity. Their elders routed them, growled at them, beat them, as they did the dogs that prowled about the fires and snapped up the fish.

Men and women toiled slowly, listlessly, with somber faces, in silence, keeping a furtive eye on the housekeeper who kept watch on the yard.

Order and system reigned there as little as abundance; and it was easy to see that everyone was wasting his time, doing nothing. Then why all these servants? That question recurred to me as I watched the housekeeper distributing the porridge in portions so parsimonious that a man's rations constituted hardly a mouthful.

"Yes," said my father. "Here we shall be two to milk a cow and four to swallow a spoonful of porridge."

Seated on low stools around large mats, everyone received, besides his allotted portion of porridge, a plate of baked fish. And that was all. Moreover, such was the dread of being deprived of it, that a guard was formed about the porridge while it was served; for the children fell on it like famished wolves. I saw one locked up for his depredations.

No one showed any surprise or resentment at such a life; on every face one read a natural resignation. There was little conversation; everyone sat eating his meager all and drinking

a great deal of water. The meal over, the men moved off and squatted beside some dying brazier, grilling corn-spikes, which they nibbled placidly in the falling night, while the dogs quarrelled over the remains of the fish which the women flung them.

That night, we realized little. On the morrow, however, we learned the whole story.

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The mistress was the daughter of a very wealthy family, who had quarrelled with her parents when they tried to force her into marriage with a man whom she hated. She was ten years old at the time, and her heart had long since been given to a handsome boy "with eyes like a stag's, raven hair, and the look of a robber chieftain." Every September of her childhood, they went thistle-hunting together, and no hare could outrun them as they flew with the Crivets over the Baragan, after its everlasting thistles.

All went well at first, but later, when she was surprised in the arms of her lover, her father hired some bullies to thrash Toudoraki, which they did so thoroughly that he never recovered. The girl then vowed, before an icon of the Virgin, undying faith to her murdered lover. She kept it. Her parents disinherited her and left the whole of their fortune to her two younger sisters.

The little retreat where she lived she owed to an uncle. But so badly was it managed that, bit by bit, it had been devoured by the "Baragan, athirst for solitude." Reduced almost to poverty, the "good Doudouca" continued, nevertheless, to welcome like a mother all the laborers whose life was impossible elsewhere. She shared with them what little she possessed, living like a nun, and permitting herself no costly pleasures. Her only delight was to contemplate the Baragan. In the thistle season, particularly, she would spend long hours recalling her youth and weeping as she rested her head on the railing of the balcony.

Marie, the housekeeper, was her confidante and her manager—a feeble manager, for her mistress forbade all harshness with her "charges."

"Let them do what they can and what they please," she would say. "We'll manage somehow."

But they did not "manage." And the poor housekeeper, ground between the upper and the nether millstone, cut down the portions of porridge and heard the following plaint sung in her honor, up and down the village:

*"Up to us, up to Doudouca*
*The porridge is leaner than lucre,*
*We fight and we beat up the cook-ah!*
*The wee 'uns in irons they lie,*
*But the mush hangs high and dry."*

Of all the derelicts entertained by the Doudouca, Marie was the oldest. The most pitiable, too, for, at forty years of age, her only passion was to serve her mistress; she had never known a Toudoraki, nor the joys of thistle-chasing in

her childhood, nor the mournful tears inspired by the Baragan.

But it is written that every living thing must weep for one thing or another. In the bright nights of September, hearing the peasants plague her with that mocking ballad, Marie would creep away under her mistress's balcony; and while the latter, lost in dreams, saw herself racing of old with her lover, her loyal servant, unjustly abused by Providence, wept bitterly a life of lonely service.

That ballad of "porridge leaner than lucre," for which one had to "beat up the cook;" that epic popular sarcasm about "the wee 'uns lying in irons" to hang the mush "high and dry;" and the tender and cruel melody to which it was disconsolately crooned, haunted my father.

"There, in a few simple words," he would say, "you have all the misery of our country—ground down by landowners not like our luckless Doudouca but like her hard father—

and God knows we have enough of them!"

He was in a position to know, for he had wandered the length and breadth of the land and knew most of our ballads by heart. But I never saw him so alarmed by a popular verdict as he was by this plaint aimed at "two women whipped by the Lord," as he put it. He hummed it over from morning till night, the whole week I spent salting fish with him on the farm. And never had his flute modulated more melancholy melody nor his lips framed words more moving.

Frantic at the thought of being confined to this life and more eager than ever to flee it and follow the liberating thistles, I would often lose patience and exclaim that he got on my nerves with his everlasting "complaining."

How much I regretted it later!

But who could have foreseen then that this harmless obsession would cost him his life?

## CHAPTER SIX

And now came the long-awaited day for which I had planned my escape. I was ready for everything, and it was in every way favorable.

That morning my father, with some other men, was to fetch two wagon-loads of fodder at Giurgeni. He said to me:

"Last night, after the squall, I noticed the pigs munching straw. That means the Crivets will be blowing to-day or to-morrow. Now, just put those thistles out of your mind, lad! We'll spend the winter here. Then, when spring comes, we'll see . . ."

I made no reply, but he understood and embraced me. Poor father . . . Yet we must each follow our fate. If mine has changed utterly, if to-day I do as I will in my own house on my own

soil, it is largely to my irresponsibility as a disobedient boy that I owe it.

There were four boys and three girls at the farm, all thin, dirty, ragged and barefooted, like myself. But thistle chasing meant little to them —a two-mile run and then the homecoming to their "porridge leaner than lucre." They were born castaways. I judged it useless to impart my plans to them.

The village boys, on the other hand, had been talking of nothing but thistles for the past week.

"Ah! This year I'll play the fool!"

Rich or poor, the former because they were spoiled, the latter because they were miserable, they all swore in unison to commit the purest follies:

"I'll go as far as Calarashi!" cried one.

"And I to Bucharest!" another.

Of course, they had no intention of trudging sixty-five or a hundred miles on foot, but where is the dream, the hope, the desire, too wild to

lodge in the brain of a boy born on the flanks of the Baragan?

Why, for example, might he not meet with some furbelowed lady, as kind as she was beautiful, passing in a six-horse phaeton? Or one of those robber chiefs with murderous muskets, who kill tyrants and pour ducats into the serf's horny palm? Or the madcap daughter of some great lord, who would take him by the hand, lead him to her lady mother and say: "Mother, this is my fiancé!"?

Why not? Was there really no truth to all the tales grandmother told him on the hearth? Or in the things he had heard from the soothsayer, old Nastasse, the village cattleherd? Especially Nastasse—

*You may think I am crazy,*
*But old Nastasse of Livezi*
*Does a hundred duties easy.*

Such was his fame. The little old man, no taller than a mattock, limping, and slightly

hunchbacked on one shoulder, watery-eyed, hairy, snub-nosed, and always losing his trousers, was the soul of the village. If a cow fell sick, he shoved his arm up her hindquarters, as far as the elbow—and she recovered. If a calf "came" badly, his hand produced it, the snout neatly folded on its forelegs. If growing pains gave a pig diarrhœa, he made it well with a pinch of hay mixed with no one knew what. If a dog was threatened with rabies, he scorched it with a hot iron between the eyes, and the danger was dispelled. He rubbed you down better than a nurse; his forecast were infallible; he could predict the weather and foretell, when the chickens were three months old, which hens would be good layers and which cocks the best "workers."

But the time to appreciate old Nastasse was when he was castrating a colt or a heifer with a couple of sticks and a bit of twine. A little lurch of the eye, that was all that the beast betrayed, as, clutching his *foudoulii,* he "relieved"

him, with the twist of a hand, and hummed:

*Come, little colt, come, little calf,*
*If we take away one half,*
*Though the fillies laugh and laugh,*
*They'll be faithful, little calf!*

As for the children, no one could handle them better. Old Nastasse would teach them to count to a hundred, and then, raising his stick, would say with finality:

"If you want to be *a man*, go out into the world! Especially if you're a bit shrewd, like us peasants for the most part."

And he would cite some examples:

"Look now, at Mr. Vasilika, the judge in Calarashi, and Mr. Andreï, the hatter in Bucharest, and Mr. Také, the great manufacturer in Braïla. All peasants like us! And what would they be, if they hadn't left us? Farm-hands! Clod-hoppers! And what are they now? *Men!*"

The boys, forming a circle around him, listened and scanned one another to detect the signs

of another "judge in Calarashi," and to dream as only children can dream.

I joined them the morning my father left, for three days, for Giurgeni.

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I had to provide myself with a good portion of porridge and some leeks for my flight; and at the farm of the Doudouca that was out of the question. But Tom Toothless, the son of the village cartwright, had promised to procure me these victuals. It was to meet him that I set out that morning.

I met him on the road, with his father. They were transporting on a harrow of briar, drawn by a horse, the carcass of a cow which they were going to abandon to the Baragan.

"She was bit by a weasel," he shouted. "Come, watch Father skin her."

It was soon done; and the cartwright, with the hide draped on the harrow, hastened home.

"Now," said Tom Toothless, "let's go tackle the baker. He's in the village, with his basket. We may be able to steal a loaf. Wouldn't that be grand for our thistle-chase, eh? Bread! I ain't tasted one in a long while, nor you either, eh? . . ."

Naturally not. I was a peasant: I never ate bread. But to steal from the baker was an idea that did not appeal to me.

"A little porridge, that's all I want," I said.

"What a fool you are! Porridge and leeks, of course, but bread's better."

How much better, for poor little mouths, I realized as we reached the village, where the children were making an infernal din in the wake of the baker.

"Bread! Bread! Bread!"

Those were the only words that one heard, over the barking of the dogs. Poor man! To sell his ten or twelve pounds of bread, he had to do battle, each week, with a pack of ravenous urchins. He rarely escaped without loss, nor did

he do so that day, for Tom Toothless succeeded in stealing a loaf. But he was betrayed by an envious comrade, and the baker came to claim four pennies from his father, who paid them with oaths and terrible threats against his son.

"This time I'll kill you!" he shouted. "If you don't clear out at once . . ."

Tom fled, with the loaf under his arm, followed by a gang of begging brats:

"A bite! Give us a bite!"

He was a good lad, and he gave away half his loaf. He gave me a bite, too.

"We'll keep the rest for to-morrow," he said.

We all trotted off together to the pastures, in search of Nastasse. Informed of the theft and the impending punishment, he consoled the culprit.

"Tell your father to let up," he cried. "I know that at your age he stole more than you. The priest here will back me up."

The priest was an old man with a calm face

and a red nose. He was as ragged as his parish. The good man was complaining to the cowherd that he was forced to get in his hay and corn himself. He swore:

"A hell of a church! A hell of a church, a hell of a parish, that can't even feed its priest!"

"And me, look at me!" replied Nastasse. "All the chores I do for nothing! . . . for a gourd, a measure of cornmeal, sometimes a couple of eggs. As for the flock, it keeps me trotting, clumpety-clump, from March to September, and all for forty cents a head."

"Yes, Nastasse, you are as tried as I am," the priest agreed.

And, groping in the pocket of his patched cassock, he drew out a little bottle:

"Here, Nastasse, drink a swig of this good brandy! That'll ease your troubles."

Father Simion was no longer a priest save in name. Like most village churches, his was closed all week, for want of worshippers. On Sundays and feast-days, some old bent hags attended the

service. With luck he made twenty or thirty cents from the sale of tapers, as much as from the two rounds of the sacristan, passing the plate and shouting like a deaf man:

"For the Church, please! For the oil, please!"

Deaths were scarce, as were marriages and baptisms. And on the first of the month, when he went around baptising families, the holy water of his cauldron would be filled with buttons and farthings instead of pennies.

But people liked him, because he was tolerant and good-natured. They told an amusing story about him. With the advance of age, his memory frequently failed him. To reply correctly to those who asked him abruptly how many days remained before Easter, he formed the habit at the beginning of Lent, of supplying himself with as many grains of corn as there were days. Every evening he would throw away a grain. In this manner, whenever a peasant put the embarrassing question, he would draw the grains from his pocket, count them, and reply exactly.

But once a mischievous little devil slipped a handful of grain into his cassock. Then the poor priest counted his daily seeds in vain; somehow there were always too many, and the great Feast was approaching. Badgered with questions, the priest pointed to his bulging pocket and replied:

"No Easter, no, no Easter this year!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

IT MIGHT have been midnight when Tom Toothless knocked at the door of the loft where I was sleeping alone. I took his hand and led him to the pile of empty sacks which served me as a bed. He snuggled into it, shivering.

"My father beat me worse than ever," he whispered softly.

His voice was so changed that I recognized him only by his baby-like breathing. He continued:

"I waited up late before I slipped into a haystack. He found me there, while I was sleeping. I think he would have killed me, but Mother ran out and tore me away."

"What a father . . . !"

Tom was not crying. I made out his face

dimly, pale, bony, very mobile, with its little burning eyes. He was my only friend. I loved him like a brother.

"Are you hungry?" he asked me before falling asleep. "There's half a loaf left. I laid it over there, on the sacks. Take some, if you want."

"And you?" I said. "What have you eaten to-day?"

"Grilled corn. I still have a blade, but it is hard and dry."

"Give it to me."

Groping in his shirt, he let out a groan.

"I'm all bruises," he explained.

I nibbled the corn and reflected that I had never been beaten.

"What a father! Poor Tom!"

I twined my arm about his neck, and we fell asleep.

Oh, that morning! The day had not dawned, when a tremendous shock woke me in affright: the door of the barn had been torn from its hinges.

"The Crivets!" I cried.

But Tom never stirred, sunk in a deep sluggish sleep. I said no more. I let him sleep on, he needed it; and I lay peering into the dark.

The farm-yard of the Doudouca, "almost on the Baragan," was literally fenceless. The barn, especially, with its back to the North, was cruelly exposed to the Crivets. Through a large hole, which must have once been a window, the wind tore in furiously, as thick as a wave. It thrilled me. Now that the door was down, the Crivets rolled in like a torrent, bathed our faces and swept on through the yawning aperture of the demolished door. I even imagined that, if it had not been so dark, I could have touched the torrent of air, so heavy it seemed and so cold.

Outside, it was a musical uproar of whistlings, crackings and groanings. A wrecked chimney roared like a bull. Boards clattering down on all sides. I listened, alone, vainly peering through the hole, while my comrade snored, his head buried in the sacks.

Suddenly, a sharp gust of breeze, then bang! something horrible sprang in my face and stung me so hard as almost to draw blood.

"The thistles! The thistles!" I screamed, fighting off the thorny balloons.

Tom sprang up and exclaimed with delight:

"Here they are! Let's go! Quick!"

We were dressed. Sticks in hand, our caps pulled down on our heads, we hurried out with the bread that was to replace the leeks and porridge.

The mad, incredible life that followed! . . . To-day, after twenty years, I still ask myself if it was not all a dream, if I really lived such a childhood. For, at no time from the legendary days of Ottoman barbarism, had my gentle and laborious land known days so atrocious as those which I am relating in this tale; never had my beloved country suffered more cruelly. But what did we children know of it? Save for the thankless existence of all those who are born in

a hovel; save for those constant privations which limn and modify the human being and no longer shock anyone, so accustomed have we grown to them, what did we know of the universal moan swelling from a million peasant breasts, from one end of Roumania to the other? Sons of the free and lazy Baragan, in whose reaches life takes shape in somnolence and expands in a mirage, we nibbled unknowing the spike of corn which God deigned to let grow, and sang under our breath the leanness of our porridge. "Leaner than lucre!"—that was true of it everywhere—throughout the whole land of Roumania—and the only feature that distinguished it was that whereas elsewhere it cost men blood and sweat, we—forgotten by God and drained by human leeches—earned it by scratching our heads. Of that we had no doubt. We were to learn it, whirled off by the Crivets, which begins to blow on the Baragan the day that its thistles are ready to sow their bad grain.

*

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By the gleams of a sky vaguely whitened by dawn, scattered clouds of fleecy thistles were bounding through semi-opaque space, now skimming the uncertain earth and now disappearing aloft in the dark, like a maddening onslaught of spherical shadows discharged by a demented Divinity.

"Ah, if we could mount on them and fly like dragons!" sighed Tom, with sincere regret, at the very moment when we were about to be buffeted by the grey country.

The Crivets and the thistles immediately tore us apart. A moment later, we were two phantoms racing with our heads to the ground. I saw him afar, struggling hard to down his beautiful thistle. Mine, fully as large and perfectly round, gave me as much trouble, for the wind had the force of a hurricane. It was not a matter of chasing a thousand thistles at once but of pursuing one as long as possible, for the fine ones were rare. Armed with light rods with a curved point, we broke the onrush of our flying

thistles just as they gave us the slip. Sometimes we were forced to halt them to catch our breath.

Longer-legged than my comrade, I was about a mile ahead of him when the first rays of the sun cast their ruddy pools on the turmoil of the Baragan. I lifted my thistle from the tip of my rod and climbed a little hill, whence I descried, on the limits of the desert, old Nastasse stubbornly seeking for his flock one last day of nourishment on the pastures swept by the Crivets.

Soon Tom appeared, followed in the distance by a file of his friends, already winded for the most part. They sprang up everywhere, in the pell-mell of thistles that rolled along with the boys. At times, both blended and it was impossible to tell which fuzzy ball was a thistle and which a boy, until a pointed hood, two arms and a tiny stick suddenly stood up abruptly, gesticulating on two legs, like a field mouse. Then, once again, the Crivets confounded them.

I pushed on before they caught up with me.

When, an hour later, they overtook me at the second halt, their number was greatly reduced. Of the village or the farm of the Doudouca there was no trace on the horizon. Unbroken Baragan . . . flying thistles whistling in the limpid air . . . little clumps of undergrowth hobbling along . . . bewildered crows . . . an interminable succession of little hillocks, of which we chose the largest as a shelter.

We were six in all. Two, being barefoot, were already bleeding badly. They gave up and offered us their provisions of porridge and leeks. Tom gave them some bread-crumbs and they turned back, a little downcast.

The four of us made a rare meal. Never had porridge and leeks known such greedy mouths; no plate of butter and cheese was ever appreciated as were those crumbs of bread which Tom handed out generously, like cake. That bread was so good that the two others asked for another crumb.

"I'll give you all the rest," said Tom, "if you trade your shoes for ours."

Their sandals were almost new, while ours were out at the heel.

"You won't go far," said my friend. "But Mataké and me . . . Lord knows! . . ."

The other two looked at one another, uncertainly.

"It is too dear," said one of them.

"Too dear?" cried Tom, indignantly.

And showing them the scars on his face, he exclaimed:

"See what that bread cost me!"

The boy seemed convinced, but he concluded the bargain by adding:

"Give me four pearl buttons, too."

And forthwith he began to unlace his sandals, while his friend, accepting his authority, did likewise.

They received the pearl buttons, the remainder of the bread and our ragged sandals. We shod

ourselves with theirs and Tom added, insinuatingly:

"It is your turn now to give us a crumb. We forgot to make ourselves a *galouchka*.*

That oversight mortified the possessors of that supreme bit of bread for a moment, but they accepted the sacrifice, like good fellows. We each made our *galouchka*, which we stowed away in our caps, to savor it at the next halt.

Then, dropping our thistles, we flung off, shouting with the wind:

*I am off for Profira,*
*Where a pound brings seven lira!*

* The *galouchka* (bread-ball) on our plains is the last mouthful of bread or *covrig* (cracknel) which some children chew and remove from their mouth, in a little ball, and lay aside for the pleasure of "eating it a second time."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THERE were no more halts for the four of us, as our two comrades were bleeding before they had gone a mile. The sturdier of the two, the one who had concluded the bargain, wished to push on a little farther, but the other, letting his thistle go, clung to his friend's coat, crying. That earned him a tap on the head which flattened his *galouchka*. The poor lad picked it up though, soiled as it was by his hair and the lining of the cap, and ate it with stifled sobs.

As he was the owner of a precious box of matches, Tom offered to buy it for two more pearl buttons.

"Give me three?"

"I'll give you three."

Thus, the second good deal was concluded,

thanks to those pearl buttons which we all loved, because they were rare and beautiful. Their value was ten times as much as that of the metal ones. There were but two ways of procuring them: to snip them from the dresses of the women at the price of terrible thrashings, or to win them by gambling, like Tom, who owned almost all the pearl buttons in the village. A third and rather humiliating way was to trade a pair of good sandals for some very bad ones, or to part with one's box of matches, an urban article more rare and important even than bread, since the village boy who cannot light himself a fire in the heather is as unfortunate as a hunter without ammunition. That was why Tom kindly consented to give his friends a part of their matches, as well as a strip of emery-paper from his box. This done, we separated.

They turned homeward, limping, and struggling to buck the gale which almost toppled them over. We watched them disappear.

Then the Baragan seemed more deserted than ever. We were alone: two children. I waited for my comrade to speak or to start on our way, while he was waiting for me to do as much. So we stood there, braced against the wind, with a foot on the rod that held our thistle, each of us avoiding the other's eyes. We stared into the infinite space that had swallowed our comrades.

Would it be wiser to follow them?

I was pondering that question, with heavy heart, when I saw Tom take off his cap, pick up his *galouchka* and nibble it slowly, in utter satisfaction. Whereupon I took off my cap . . .

But before I could pick up my *galouchka,* a furious gust of wind swept off our thistles and our caps along with them!

We greeted it with shouts of joy.

And our gallopade began again, more headlong than ever.

So does Fate trace the paths of mankind.

*

* *

We ran on and on, all that first day, a day long and rich as a lifetime, full of sky, of earth, of sun and of Crivets. At dusk, it turned to unfamiliar darkness, which overtook us on the open plain. We were afraid then, but refused to admit it, each of us wishing to impress the other with his courage.

"Mataké, there are no ghosts, you know; don't be afraid," said Tom, looking around him.

"I know. There are no ghosts. Except in the graveyards, I suppose . . ."

"No. Not even there. I was in one, once, after dark . . ."

He crossed himself three times, saying:

"Cross yourself, just the same."

I crossed myself promptly.

We had stopped for the night in a little hollow full of roots, where the darkness was even thicker than elsewhere. There, sheltered from the Crivets, we kindled a fire and decided to pass the night. Tom drew our provisions from his pockets, but we succumbed to the warmth and

our weariness. Our arms were too heavy to lift the food to our lips. Our yawns almost unhinged our jaws. And we slumped one on the other, our eyes full of red fire rimmed with black night. That was the last picture that I carried off in my sleep, which was unbroken before morning.

A gust of wind, during the night, had swept the embers among the mounds of roots, thistle and heather which had accumulated in the hollow, and set them afire. We woke, in a trance, and blinked at the flames shooting skyward. The intense heat forced us to the brink of the ditch, where we drowsed for an eternity, facing the conflagration, with our backs to the black Baragan, when a wild gallop in the shadows shook the ground and our hearts and sent us scrambling to the bottom of the gully, where the fire was dying.

My laboring heart cut my breath. Tom's face was cadaverous. We were both speechless; our eyes echoed a vain question as to the nature of this unaccountable sound. I was afraid to hear

my own voice. For a long time, in the silence, each crack of the branches, as the fire slowly consumed them, shook our bodies painfully; we lay petrified with fear.

Once, my comrade tried to speak. He could not move his lips. Then, as the last flames guttered out, we could not even see each other's eyes, and that increased our terror. We wound our arms tightly around one another.

None too soon, for again the fantastic gallop echoed through the night, and this time it grazed the very brink of our gully.

This continued until daybreak when, worn out, our cheeks wet with tears, we discovered that the cause of our fright was a young colt which, escaping from some gentleman's farm, had been racing to and fro, the length and breadth of the Baragan, frightened by the thistles blowing over its head.

Reassured, we fell asleep again, to wake at last under the dazzling rays of the sun which the Crivets was lashing incessantly. A hearty appe-

tite made us devour our provisions. And life, in our eyes, became once more what it is.

It is full of light and of shadow.

I knew its light well. Of its shadow I knew little that morning, but two rifle-shots, which snapped out just as we were preparing to leave the gully, were to teach me the cruelty of man. I little suspected the drama that had been so swiftly played out.

"It must be some hunters," I said, as I heard the detonations.

"Of course," Tom agreed.

Clambering up to the brink of the plain, he looked out onto the Baragan and fell back in alarm:

"Two policemen leaning over a man. They have killed him," he groaned.

We took refuge rapidly under the hill, hiding in the roots. From our vantage point, we saw the policemen drag a body, each holding an arm, straight to the hollow, into which they rolled

it with a kick. Noticing the fresh ashes, one of them said:

"Some shepherd spent the night here."

They marched off quietly, in step, their rifles slung over their shoulders.

When they had vanished over the horizon, we inspected the man they had killed. He was a tattered young peasant. He was lying face up, under the dazzling sky, his arms open, his legs spread, his face flabbergasted. His wrists were blue from the strain of the handcuffs.

Tom squatted suddenly and opened one eyelid.

"His eyes were green," he said.

Then, rising:

"Let's run before the Captain arrives."

My companion dreaded the Police Captain, as all peasants do; but on the Baragan, his function falls to the scavenger.

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We no longer had our rods nor our thistles,

for the fire had burned them. And we had lost our desire to chase other thistles, as the Crivets sent them spinning about us.

Arms swinging, we trudged on in silence, propelled by the wind. Sometimes we laid bets as to who could walk longest with his eyes shut, swearing not to cheat, but cheating just the same —and growing very giddy. At last, the outline of a building appeared on the horizon; it was the railway station of Tchoulnitza, the heart of the Baragan. From afar it looked like a shed abandoned in the desert and resting on endless black ties. Some scrawny trees made it seem even lonelier. The station-master was running after a dog which was pursuing a chicken. A woman, her skirts blowing in the wind, was battling to hang out her washing.

We avoided this family and made for the station café where tramps are usually assured of a better welcome than at the hands of officials. The owner, a robust peasant with a kindly face, received us better than we hoped. We told him

of our thistle-chase and, without scolding us, he gave us bread, lard, and even some lemonade. The only question he asked was what direction we had come from.

"Over from Hagiéni," I replied.

And that was all. But, soon after, the lamp-lighter came along and grilled us with questions, which turned into threats: who were we; why had we left home; where were we going?

"We ought to hand you over to the police," he said.

"Leave the children alone!" cried the inn-keeper. "You are not a father or a husband. What do you know about it?"

The lamp-lighter shut up promptly. Then he asked for "a glass," which was refused with a curt Turkish monosyllable: *iok!* And the inn-keeper took up his newspaper.

At that moment something frightful happened: a young peasant woman, covered with dust, her feet bleeding, and her face caked with mud,

appeared in the door and, leaning on the frame, cried in a voice hoarse with tears:

"Christians! . . . Haven't you seen two policemen leading a peasant in chains?"

Tom started.

"We haven't seen nothing!" he replied, terror-stricken.

The woman disappeared at a run. The lamp-lighter turned toward my friend with a searching glance and said:

"You were quick to deny it. That makes me think . . ."

"I told you to leave the children alone," interrupted the inn-keeper. "You have been drinking too much this morning. Get out."

The lamp-lighter left. After kissing the inn-keeper's hand, we thought it prudent to do likewise.

At the station, a freight train bound for Bucharest was grinding and backing. We had never seen anything like it on the Baragan, and as we

watched its manœuvres, we decided to hitch on to it when it pulled out.

"They say it goes quick as the wind," my comrade whispered. "How wonderful it must be!"

It *was* wonderful. We concealed ourselves in a car full of timber, and the train carried us without a stop as far as Lehliou. On the way we came out of our hiding-place to look at the country, and in a few brief hours we saw things which it would have required a year to know, particularly peasants tilling their barren acres and beating their women and their beasts. Others, their loads spilled by the bad roads, their wagons broken, far from any habitation, were standing scratching their heads in the midst of the fields.

Toward the end of the journey, we were discovered by a brakeman. He made no trouble for us. Settled in the turret of the car ahead, he had begun suddenly to play his flute. The sound drew us toward him. We approached at first very cautiously. Then, seeing him smile kindly,

we went nearer. He was a man of mature years, who seemed lost in reverie. He often spat on his fingers, moistening the holes of his flute, and played peasant tunes, half-merry, half-sad.

Shortly before we reached the station of Lehliou, he played a tune dear to my father and myself:

*"The Oltlanders are gone . . . gone . . ."*

It made me cry bitterly, and I buried my face in my hands.

## CHAPTER NINE

As we reached Lehliou, the brakeman said to us:

"Well, did you have a good time? Now, wait a bit: there'll be a mixed train along presently. I'll speak to a pal who'll take you home."

"But we're not from Tchoulnitza and we won't go home," Tom objected.

"A-a-ah! . . . That's a horse of another color! Where are you from, then, and where are you going?"

"We're from over by Hagiéni and we're off to see the world!"

"To see the world? That's another matter! And you look as though you meant it . . . Come along with me!"

"You won't give us up to the police?"

"God forbid! . . . I myself wanted to see the world and I lit out when I was younger than you are. So I'd like to know how I can help you? You've surely not left home because they spoiled you. A dog flees the whip, not the sugar!"

He went away for a moment, then came back, pensive. Together, we walked to an inn close by the station. Many peasant carts and wagons were outside. It was here that our fate was decided and in the most unforeseen fashion.

The inn was crammed with peasants, who had come from a large fair. As soon as we entered, Tom's glance met that of a young villager sitting with a beautiful woman at the very end of the room. For a moment the two eyed one another, fascinated by what they saw. Then the man struck his thigh and cried in a loud voice that drew everyone's attention to him:

"I'd expect to see Death here sooner than you, Yonel. Come here, my lad."

Yonel, whom we called Tom Toothless because he had lost his front tooth, went up timidly, kissed

the man's right hand and began to weep, dully.

"Don't cry, lad," said the other, "this is my wife, Lina." Then, turning to her: "Just fancy, it's my brother!"

Yonel also kissed the woman's hand; she put her arm about his waist, caressed him and dried his tears.

"Who are your friends?" Tom's brother asked.

"Well, well, well!" answered the brakeman. "I'm nobody now you've met your brother, eh? But I can drink to your health, lad!"

We sat down at the table. Soon after, our adventures were known to everyone.

"A story of thistle-hunting!" Yonel's brother cried, his face darkening. "It's not the children's fault nor the parents' either. The whole country, from Dorohö to Vârciorova, is one vast Baragan. And another sort of thistle, poisonous as can be, stalks across it whip in hand. Those are the thistles we must wipe out, if we don't want to see our children forsaking their homes and going out adventuring through the world."

"Hush, Costaké!" his wife whispered, looking around nervously. "Don't you think it's high time we were off? The horses are rested now."

Costaké rose, tall, strapping, robust, tanned by the sun. His eyes gleamed angrily.

"Ay, let us go!"

Then, laying a hand on my head:

"Are you coming with us to Vlachka?" he asked me kindly. "There, too, the thistles take the best places in the sun, but I can at least teach you and Yonel the trade of cartwright. Some day you shall build carts for the peasants and go selling them at fairs as I do. And you'll learn to know this country and its suffering!"

So I went with Costaké, his wife and Yonel into the Vlachka district.

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The township was called Three Hamlets. We reached it one dark, wet, icy afternoon, crushed with fatigue and soaked to the skin, in spite of the

sack with which each of us had covered his head and shoulders. It was almost dark. But I could see why the place was called Three Hamlets; there were, in effect, three groups of houses separated by two brooks which met exactly in front of the Town Hall. It was a poor township. The houses, covered with rotted reeds, sank into the ground; mean enclosures of brambles and briars ran around them, without, however, affording the slightest protection.

We were not, as is usual, met by packs of excited dogs, but we heard their hoarse barks coming from under the rain-flattened haycocks.

We drove up to Costaké's house, which belonged to his father-in-law, Toma, the cartwright, a famous workman. It stood close to one of the two brooks, and consisted of a long row of rooms adjoining the forge and workshops. A deafening din greeted us. The vast muddy yard, black as pitch, rang with the cries of men and women, the squawling of children and the delirious howling of the dogs. The adults em-

braced each other, the urchins rummaged through the cart; the dogs jumped upon us, soiling us horribly. Immediately the family's curiosity was directed upon us, the two strangers.

"Who are you?" the four apprentices asked us.

Tom answered:

"I'm Yonel, Costaké's brother. And this is Mataké. He's just like a brother to me."

"Where do you hail from?"

"From Ialomitza."

"Are you going to stay with us?"

"Ay, we're going to learn how to build carts for the peasants and we'll be selling them at fairs and markets like Costaké."

"That won't be to-morrow!" an apprentice railed.

I looked at the great fire in the forge, whilst we went, pell-mell, the dogs at our heels, into a great room which could easily hold a dozen persons. The grandmother, furious at the dogs' audacity, promptly chased them out. The woman they called "grandmother" was rocking

a child to sleep, a boy aged three, Costaké's only son. Toma's wife was by no means an old woman. She seemed to rule the house, for it was to her they went for everything. We found her huddled by the hearth, the child on her knees, telling him interminable fairy tales which she changed to suit her mood.

"And the evil witch cried out: 'A firebrand and a coal. Will you hush up, lad?' "

Then the infant interrupted:

"But why didn't Fet-Frumos kill the witch?"

"Because then the story would be finished and Grandmother would have nothing more to tell Patroutz!" his father answered, kissing him and giving him a handsome clown which he had bought for him at the fair.

Then, under his breath:

"How is Toudoritza?" he asked his mother-in-law.

"Same as ever: she's crying her eyes out. A pretty girl like her! You'd think there were no other lads in the world."

"You can't suit these things to your liking; you know that as well as I do."

I gathered that there must be a pretty girl who had not greeted us and that she was weeping because she had been jilted. Soon I learned the whole story; at the forge, where we went to chat with the apprentices, they told it to us in detail. It was Tom who ventured to ask them, slyly:

"We know everyone here," he said, "except Toudoritza. She must be sick."

This was enough to set their tongues wagging:

"No, she's not sick," a garrulous red-headed boy told us. "She's hiding and weeping fit to break your heart because Tanasse, her suitor, has just announced his engagement to a fast woman, Stana. And Stana's the mistress of the boyar —the landlord, you know—even now. And she's pregnant—it's him done it, too. You see poor Tanasse has many mouths to feed, his old parents and his little brothers—and they're up to their necks in debt. The landlord could sell them out any minute. But he's wiping out the debt, now

that Tanasse is willing to marry Stana and 'save her from shame.' He's even giving them some land and cattle. It's a pity about Tanasse, for he's a good lad. He's as miserable as Toudoritza, but he can't do otherwise. That's why Toudoritza hides and cries all day long."

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At the evening meal, counting the "mouths" assembled around old Toma's board, I saw that they could rival those for whom Tanasse provided. There were twelve of us. Counting Toudoritza, whom they called in to the table, there were thirteen of us, plus little Patroutz. For old Toma had another son-in-law, Dinou, who had just married his second daughter, Maria, and who was also a cartwright. Here was a single household of three families harnessed to the same task, but that task did not seem to be making anyone rich. On the contrary, the lack of servants and of adult workmen, and the strict

economy which reigned over the house, proved rather that this large household lived in reduced circumstances. Nor did I fail the better to appreciate the sacrifice that these good people were making when they cheerfully received Yonel and myself.

"Where twelve find food, fourteen need not go short!" the grandmother concluded, after they had discussed our unforeseen arrival.

"And then," Costaké added, "there is so much to be done around the place, the cattle, the workshops, the household. They'll richly earn their crust, not to speak of the service we will have done them, in a few years, by giving them a trade. What was I to do? I could hardly leave them wandering over the Baragan, discovering the world. You wouldn't treat a dog that way, by all that's holy!"

Costaké's ire rose; he vented it bitterly:

"There's the answer to the question of thistle-chasing. The real thistles are the rich landowners, the hangmen thistles, the evil, festering

canker that rages over our poor country and turns it into a huge Baragan. . . . For the thousandth time, I wonder how the peasant fails to feel the pricking of these thistles as they invade his home, grow like parasites on his back and suck him dry of his last drop of blood? How is it, how is it that he does not go mad with rage and set fire to all these evil weeds that drive him from house and home?"

I had never until then heard anyone speak like this; I trembled with happiness. The others, too, must have agreed with Costaké, for nobody seemed vexed. The parents, who looked somewhat worried, seemed already convinced. Dinou, a blond man with a slightly stupid glance and clumsy manners, listened with a sort of lugubrious deference. It was obvious that he was very young still, and only half awake. As for the young wives, Lina and Maria, they sat quite still, each gazing tenderly at her man.

The four apprentices took much more interest in the discussion; they whispered words which

escaped the ears of their elders; the red-head, especially, was a fierce little devil. His name was Elie; he was utterly alone in the world. Two apprentices were already practically full-fledged workmen; they took great trouble to give an impression of seriousness; the last was a glutton who spoke little and worked like a horse, it was said. All four appeared very much attached to the house. They were particularly devoted to Costaké, whom they called the "pillar of the home." That was why they drank up his words and shared his anger.

Still another person, Toudoritza, had heard and approved Costaké. We had given up hope of seeing her that evening when a door opened gently and she appeared. She was a frail young girl; there were deep circles under her great, warm eyes; her glance was frank, proud, strong; she had a mouth like a cherry and was neatly, almost coquettishly, clad. She greeted us calmly, smoothed her rich, brown hair with one hand, cast a brief glance at us, the newcomers, and sat

down between her father and mother. Then in a tone that rang with indignation:

"You're right, dearest Costaké," she said, "you're right to want to set fire to those nests of vipers infesting our land. When that day dawns, you can count on me."

How beautiful she was, Toudoritza, at that moment! And if it is true that a lad not yet fifteen can really fall in love with a girl older than himself, then at that moment I fell in love with Toudoritza.

Old Toma put his arm about her waist and, drawing her to him, said:

"You must not be so resentful! Everything passes, even love. Anyhow, Tanasse is not worthy of you."

"He is; he is worthy of me," she answered, "I can forgive him, yes, but I know whom I must hate from now on. Ah, believe me! I shall not fail to burn my share of thistles; I've felt their prick, ay, that I have . . ."

The mother motioned to the others to keep

quiet and not to excite her further. Then Lina and Maria rested their heads on their husbands' shoulders and closed their eyes. Seeing this, Toudoritza asked sadly:

"What about me? Won't I find a loved shoulder on which to rest my head?"

All went to bed that evening with a heavy heart. . . .

## CHAPTER TEN

AFTER the bad weather which lasted the week of our journey, the sun now shone for several days and Three Hamlets decided to gather in its corn. Every family abandoned its usual occupations; the whole township—men, women, children, oldsters, cattle, dogs, cats, even a few hogs —swooped down upon the fields. Some, who owned a little land and were independent of the boyar, went to their own fields. But the vast majority, the numberless "poor devils glued to the soil" who sowed only on land yielded conditionally by the lord and master, had to fulfill the first of these conditions and gather the boyar's crops first.

The scenes of this gathering were both sorrowful and gay. There was sorrow, first, because the

year had been a dry one; instead of dense fields which in previous years were able to hide a horse from view, this year the corn did not even top the heads of the reapers. Both ears and grain, the peasants said, were consumptive. And the peasants vented their anger:

"Not only will we sell none and therefore not pay back our debts, but we'll be short of flour before Lent. We'll starve to death this winter, and the cattle, too."

The peasants' faces contracted with distress as they weighed the ears in their hands, looked at them for a long time, sniffed at them and lamented. They were poor devils, these Vlachkans, just as poor as our folk, away at Ialomitza; thin, gaunt people, their bones showing through their skins, their brows wrinkled prematurely, their eyes dulled, their cheeks unshaven for weeks. Their shirts, which hung down to the knee, were so much patched that one could no longer count the pieces; their trousers were but a mass of tatters. Barefoot, bareheaded, beg-

gars among beggars; I pitied them as though they were all my kin. Their wives, past the age of thirty, looked like old women. Pressed by this work which must be done quickly, those who nursed their babies would abandon the latter to some younger brother, and there the infants lay, right in the corn, howling to the point of suffocation. Dogs went about gnawing at the filthy swaddling clothes and licking the infants' faces. Then the older brother would grasp the brat by one arm and set out in search of his mother, dragging the living doll behind him like a package, and saying:

"There's mother, there's mother!"

No, there was nothing merry in the life of such people. But the young people, for their part, went as wild as at a wedding. They shouted and sang and laughed: they kissed; they played all manner of practical jokes; the blouses of the girls gleamed, fiery-red, citron-yellow or blue-green; carts stood by, filled with naked ears of corn, and a dazzling sunshine streamed over it all.

Under glances afire with passion, ardent girls pursued one another, their pointed breasts shaking as they ran. They were followed, to greater advantage, by the lads, who crushed these pointed breasts against their manly bosoms. Pairs struggled the better to feel each other; at times, a mild pretense of protest might be made for the mothers' benefit. The latter were annoyed, but what did it matter?

Cats and dogs gave chase to rats which rose on all sides. Frolicsome hogs, their yokes on their backs, galloped away, a head of corn between their jaws, their own tails like corkscrews. Only the oxen, like the married people, took no part in the joys of the reaping. Indifferent, they chewed the end of the same dry stalk and the same melancholy as they waited to be yoked.

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Almost the same indifference reigned in old Toma's field, since they were all married folk

save Toudoritza, who felt sorrowful and humiliated because she was not. Clad in a blouse and skirt with large figures of dazzling color, a snow-white kerchief on her head, she plucked at the stalks with a mechanical swiftness, and, like all good workers, without missing a single one. The baskets were filled in the twinkling of an eye. Then they were emptied into the cart where the corn glittered like gold in the sunlight. Such spikes as were not sufficiently dry were bound two by two by their own leaves; they were even tied to the horns of the oxen as we went home to the village.

I enjoyed being near Toudoritza; I would have leapt into the fire if that could have lessened her sorrow in any way. And Toudoritza, understanding my dog-like devotion, enjoyed being with me:

"Am I dear to you, Mataké? Yes? So much the luckier, I: I feel so lonely."

"What prayer can I say for you, Toudoritza?"

"Pray that Stana die! Or that the world burn!"

It was very difficult indeed to imagine the fulfilment of such a prayer, for Toudoritza's rival flourished like a beautiful peony, and scampered about like a heifer, a few yards away from us in the boyar's field. And that world I might wish burned, bore itself even better than Stana. There it loomed, with its fine manor-house, all oak and stone, rising from the flank of the great hill that dominated the village——the manor-house, with its attics full of grain, drought or no drought, its stables stocked with cattle, its noisy farmyard and its numberless farm-hands leading magnificent teams back and forth from barn to field! No, that world was far from burning, which robbed Toudoritza of her Tanasse and made her unhappy.

All the township sympathized with Toudoritza, hating Stana, not so much because the latter behaved like a trollop, but because, protected by the landlord, her powerful lover, she was rising out of her native wretchedness and becoming almost a lady. This fact especially riled the gossips of the village:

"But," they said by way of consolation, "this will not bring her happiness, because Tanasse hates her. Tanasse loves Toudoritza."

It was all too true. One evening, in old Stoïan's tavern, I had heard Tanasse sing a song, popular at the time, which might have been written expressly for him:

*"Let me kiss your cheek, your brow*
*Toudoritza, darling!*
*Kiss your eyes and lashes now,*
*Toudoritza, darling!"*

"Take care, Tanasse; don't let Stana hear you!" old Stoïan warned.

"Let her hear me!" he answered with a sneer, feigning indifference, though he was, in reality, heartbroken about the affair.

"It's a fine couple you'll make, the pair of you," a peasant mocked.

"Well, what about it?" Tanasse cried, stung to the quick.

"Nothing," the other replied, lowering his

voice. "All I wanted to say was that you'll be unhappy."

"That's all right, that's all right, gentle soul . . ."

They feared Tanasse in the village and even further afield. He drank little, he was swift to anger, and when it came to fighting, he struck hard. But he appeared gentle, with his dreamy eyes, his smiling lips, his slow movements.

Another day I had the pleasure of talking to him. It was in the threshing season. Old Toma owned a threshing-machine, a luxury all the villagers could not afford. Accordingly, he was glad to lend it, for it hurt him, he said, to see "the peasants, in this age of machinery, putting their ears in a sack and beating them with clubs, then shelling them by hand as in the days of Jesus Christ." And, when it left his house, the thresher went from cottage to cottage as though under its own power; it made the rounds of the village like a messenger bearing tidings of better times to come. In order to preserve it from

rough treatment, it was again old Toma who sent an apprentice out every day to observe how things were faring and to warn the peasants not to fill it too full nor allow the children to turn it when empty or especially to put nails in it. We could find out where it was by listening for its noise; the only other threshing-machines belonged to the mayor and priest, but they, of course, never lent theirs to anyone.

Now one morning old Toma happened to send me to see where the thresher was and how it was doing. I discovered it at Tanasse's; he was working away manfully, and terrifying the hens. One of his sisters was feeding it carefully, two brothers were taking turns at the wheel, and a little mite of a brother, no higher than a boot, was setting up a great clamor that he, too, might be allowed to turn. Still two more brothers and sisters sat around a tub filled with ears, and amused themselves shelling by hand. One sister was working with her mother; and the last-born was being rocked to sleep by his father, who suf-

fered from chronic rheumatism, which did not prevent him from having a child, year-in year-out. (Three other sons worked at Giurgiu!)

Poor Tanasse was the eldest of this family of rabbits. He was toiling away as hard as four men when I arrived; dust covered him from head to foot and the perspiration stood out on his face in great beads.

"There *are* a lot of you!" I said in order to be saying something.

"Ay, at table! A bag of flour lasts us three days! But it's not so easy to find the flour!"

Then:

"It was you who went away with Yonel chasing the thistles?"

"Yes. We were starving to death in the Baragan."

"Everywhere is a Baragan! Everywhere people are starving to death!"

As I moved off, he saw me to the gate:

"Tell old Toma that I'll send him back the

machine to-morrow, cleaned, oiled and in good shape. No one needs it any more."

And he added in a low voice:

"And tell Toudoritza that I have not forgotten her."

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I gave both messages; then we all sank deep into that brutish wretchedness which is the life of the Roumanian peasant. A merciless autumn fell upon our heads before anyone was able to lay aside a single stalk of corn, the leaves of which are used as fodder, the rest as fuel. Rain and hail poured down upon us, changing the world into an icy slough. Brooks became rivers; fields and villages were flooded. There were no more roads; earth was an infinite marsh, far as the eye could travel.

Happy, then, were those who had fuel to warm their bodies and who could stand behind their windows, as wind, water and mud beat against

them. Save for infants and invalids, there were no more than a dozen such fortunate people. All the others were outside, even the children and old men. There was nothing human in the lives they led, in the struggle they put up for a handful of flour and a twig to throw on the fire.

Under a heaven so clayey that one might have thought the end of the world was at hand, carts crept forward like turtles over the fields, over the roads, over an earth which God was blasting with all the hatred in His heart. Formless carts, stunted beasts, unrecognizable men, mud-caked fodder, and never mercy anywhere, neither in heaven nor upon earth. Yet how direly we needed mercy, divine and human, when the carts stuck in the mud or overturned; when the beasts fell upon their knees and implored pity of us; when the men beat the beasts and fought with each other; when the stalks rotted away in the puddles and we had to carry them in sheaves on the backs of men, on the backs of women, on the backs of children; when these men and these

women and these children were but bundles of mud-soaked rags, great clods of earth panting under the action of useless hearts.

Such were the peasants of Roumania in the autumn of nineteen hundred and six.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

It is misery that engenders drunkenness among the common people.

The Roumanian is not a drunkard, but the moment he is unhappy, he takes to drink. He drinks especially hard when he feels the blade cutting his flesh to the bone. That blade is misery. When this happens he becomes unrecognizable. From the philosopher, the kindly man he is by nature, he turns into a brute who will not stop at crime.

There was no crime in Three Hamlets that autumn, but the peasants drank all they had and even what they had not. I have never seen practically a whole village throw itself so desperately upon alcohol. Habitually, in my country, people drink only on Sundays. As soon as the stalks were gathered, they began to drink every day.

No one could forget that gathering—and with reason. Half the township took sick; many died, especially among the children. A number of peasants saw their oxen drop in harness. And disaster followed upon disaster with for sole end the horror of realizing that the corn was growing moldy, rotten. Famine already ravaged the stables of those who counted on the stalks alone. That was how madness seized these men.

About the beginning of November, a deputation of peasants went to beg the mayor to take them to the landlord:

"Let him lend us a little fodder," they said. "He has some; he sells it every week by the trainload."

The mayor, a creature of the boyar's, used them harshly.

"You want him to lend you fodder, eh! To lend you this and lend you that! No sooner do things go amiss than, hop! we're off to the landlord to ask him to lend us something. As if the boyar was God! Do something yourselves

to get out of this pickle! Good Lord, are you helpless? And I'll tell you something else: what the landlord does with his property is none of your business. If he sells fodder by the train-load, it's his affair."

The peasants went "to court" alone, but the boyar, who represented the district in Parliament, had just left for Bucharest that night. His manager treated them even worse than the mayor had; he insulted them rudely and had them chased off by the farm-hands. They knew what to expect from that quarter. And what to expect from God, too. Only alcohol was left them, the great consoler authorized by God and by the law. Alcohol alone could satisfy everyone—except the women.

The woman paid for one and all, for the husband, for God, for the law, for the boyar, for the lack of fodder and even for the bad weather. Every evening on the dark, broken road, one could see a wife, a mother or a sister dragging home a peasant who fell at every ten steps he

took. The woman followed him into the mud and caught a rain of blows for her trouble. A like drubbing awaited her at home. The following morning always brought repentance, for the man was not a brute at heart. Then he would help in the housework, busy himself with the cattle and spend a good part of the day sorting out the stalks, burning some and drying others by the fire. Hearths usually clean looked like pigpens; mud and mildew covered the very tables.

"Could Hell be worse, O Lord?" the women lamented.

Crouching by the fire and mending his sandals, the man would answer:

"Some day we should burn all the manor-houses, burn even Bucharest."

But this he could not accomplish alone, nor that very day. He could at best follow the road to the inn. Which is precisely what he did, towards evening, when boredom, the presentiment of the black future and the sight of some neighbors, as unhappy as himself, stopping in

front of his door, combined to remind him of the hour of blessed consolation.

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At old Toma's—or "at the cartwright's," as people said—things were not much more comfortable. Famine did not threaten them, it is true, but lack of money to pay their debts was as obvious as elsewhere, more especially since during that year of drought few of the villagers had been in a position to buy new carts. Autumn repairs, which had formerly been plentiful, were few and far between. So people twiddled their thumbs as they pottered about the cattle or chatted as they roasted corn.

Old Toma and his two sons-in-law, although sober, nevertheless went to old Stoïan's inn, which was next door to the forge, to "kill time." The women stayed at home, always busy at something. As for us apprentices, we went here, there and everywhere, mingling a jot of work

with a great deal of day-dreaming. I enjoyed being alone most of the time, for "a stranger is always a stranger" in township or family. When they rebuked me, they used to call me "a hare of nine frontiers." And they repeated "the story of the thistles" to whoever cared to ask or whoever did not.

"It was the thistles brought him to us as a gift." This was not said maliciously, but it grieved me very much all the same. I was a lad who had been "picked up off the road" through pity. Such things are not very pleasant to hear when one is fifteen years old and has already tasted not a little bitterness; they pile up in the heart, which swells sometimes and makes one weep at the memory of the little cottage at Laténi, of one's dead mother, of one's father, lost in the world.

Tom Toothless, of course, was so much among his own people that gradually he began to forget me, and we were becoming estranged. In return, I won Toudoritza's heart because she too

was alone in her misfortune. I became the confidant of her bitterest tears, and she wept bitterly, because Tanasse, against a vestige of hope she had retained, had just married Stana.

A "shameful" wedding, said the village, in spite of the presence of "Mr. Manager," witness, against his will, for bride and groom. At this wedding we counted on our fingers the number of peasants friendly to the boyar; the well-to-do, those who lacked nothing, were a dozen. As the procession emerged from the church, some voices in the crowd reminded Stana of her guilty relations with the village hangman, and an urchin played the drum on a cracked pot.

That Sunday I was among those who saw Tanasse walk beside the woman they called a punk. Poor fellow! He was a pitiful sight indeed, cringing, afraid to look anyone in the eye. But he was even more to be pitied on the morrow, Monday morning. Costaké and I were in the forge, putting up the tools, when we saw him, dressed in his wedding clothes, making straight

for the inn. Wordless, with lowered head, he passed by under our eyes. Yet he liked us; Costaké was his best friend.

"He didn't notice us," Costaké said. "He must be very unhappy. Let's go and see him."

The inn was empty. In the back room, old Stoïan and Tanasse, both on their feet, poured out short drinks for each other without saying a word. To avoid embarrassing them, I withdrew into my corner with a cat in my arms; but for a long time they did not open their lips. Tanasse was so red in the face as to be frightening. Soon I saw him take the thread of beaten gold and the little citron-sprig—symbols of marriage—out of his button-hole and slip them noiselessly under the table.

"It's done," he said. Then, in a hoarse voice, as he gazed at Costaké: "Now the punk is my wife."

"It was God's will!" old Stoïan said.

"The cur willed it!" cried Tanasse, "But may I be a cur like him if I don't play him a dirty trick one of these days."

"You'll find plenty of friends to back you up!" Costaké told him. "The whole district, in fact. There are plenty of other Tanasses whom he compelled to marry other Stanas."

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Such storms of anger often broke out in old Stoïan's tavern, for the innkeeper, too, had his grievances against the landlord, and besides, he catered to the peasants. But one day I witnessed an angry scene which echoed beyond the walls of the inn. It was a Sunday, towards the end of November. For the last few days now, a dry frost had been raging like a torrent of fire, turning the mud into flint. This provided the peasants, assembled long before noon in front of the inn, with a topic for anguished discussion. On Sundays, the inn was closed until the church service was over. This law had been passed in order to force the peasants to attend church at least on Sunday morning. But the men did not

go any more on that account; they left the liturgy for the adoration of a few "deaf old women." They came and leaned against the closed shutters of old Stoïan's inn as they waited for the closing of church and the opening of the tavern.

Under a sun which made the hoarfrost on the acacia-trees sparkle, young and old, drolly arrayed in scarlet holiday scarves, were talking gloomily together. They formed a compact mass, when the priest went by, furious.

"You're a crowd of ne'er-do-wells!" he shouted at them. "Really, I do not know why God does not strike you down with His thunderbolts."

"He does throw His thunderbolts at us!" a voice promptly replied. "But there are some lucky folk provided with lightning-rods."

We realized then that there was a stranger among us, a man from the city, a young man wearing a hat. It was his reply that had given rise to the general mirth.

"Yes," he went on, "on you peasants, and on us workmen, this priest's God hurls down His

thunderbolts every day; there are famines for men and beast; frosts, like this one, which is annihilating your fields; storms, like those of last month, which strike down peasants and cattle all along the road; droughts like that which destroyed this year's harvest. Ay, those thunderbolts are especially for you. But what you ought to ask yourselves is why your landlord is immune from all these misfortunes? Why are his attics full and his cattle intact? Why do not God's thunderbolts reduce him, too, to starvation? And the priest? And the mayor? And a few other friends? Are there possible grounds for believing in celestial protection or in the lightning-rod?"

The stranger cast an intelligent, questioning glance on the assembly. The villagers uttered cries of approval; then they wished to know who he was.

"I am from Bucharest," he said, "and I work with my hands, just as you do; but I have learned to know my enemies, which are neither God nor His thunderbolts. They are the landlords of

town and village who reduce us to misery, even if the years are good ones. As for us, they're never good to us."

He took a packet of circulars out of his pocket and distributed them.

"Here," he added, "you will read things that every citizen should know; this is the Constitution of our country or the mother of all our laws. It is written here that you have the right of free assembly, writing and speech; it goes on to say that no one may keep a man under arrest longer than twenty-four hours nor enter his home without a warrant from a Justice of the Peace. Those are your rights; you must know them and make them respected. Then you must conquer other rights; universal suffrage to begin with. That fifty peasants should have the electoral vote which a priest enjoys all to himself, is ridiculous and shameful. Finally, you must exact the return of land which has been stolen from you . . ."

"Quite right! Ay, true!" the peasants cried. "We want our land."

"Who's distributing land?" a harsh voice suddenly interrupted. It was the policeman.

"I am distributing only the Constitution, sir," the man from the city answered courageously. "As for the land, the peasants will have to seize it!"

"We'll see what you will have to 'seize' presently," the policeman answered as he led him away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

With the first snowflake which fell clinging against the window-pane, calm came to Toudoritza. We noticed both these things simultaneously one afternoon while she was embroidering by the window and I was unravelling for her use a multicolored heap of woolen threads.

"Snow, snow!" she cried, clapping her hands like a child. "We really needed a Saint Nicholas arrayed in a white beard!"

And, taking up her work again, she hummed timidly:

*"What made you so slender,*
*So subtle and tender,*
*Toudoritza, darling!"*

Since I first set foot in the house, this was the

only time I had ever heard her sing. Realizing this herself:

"Good heavens, you can forget anything in life!" she sighed. "Did you hear, Mataké? I expected to die . . . and here I am singing!"

"So much the better," I said. "You must be very happy to know that you are, as that song says, slender and tender."

She looked at me.

"You must not go and fall in love with me, Mataké," she said, playfully, with a note of mockery.

"And why not?" I cried.

"Yes, quite true; why not? Simply because you are only fifteen. But one day you'll be becoming a fine lad. Then you will be very much loved by the Toudoritzas of this world."

"I would like this Toudoritza here—you—to love me."

"I, darling? That day I shall be somebody's wife and a mother into the bargain and all will be over for me. Some brats, perpetually dirty,

and a crabbed mother-in-law squawling after me; a husband who will have stopped loving me and call me a slattern and perhaps beat me."

"Why are you in such a hurry to get married at the age of twenty, then?"

"That is our fate, Mataké. . . . We go towards marriage as we go towards death, loving the while."

"Then you must not envy Stana's fate; she'll be getting beaten soon, for Tanasse does not love her."

Toudoritza pondered a moment, her glance vague.

"That is not the same thing, darling. . . . Stana is a fast woman, a lusty wench who cares as little for Tanasse as she does for the boyar, as she does for marriage, as she does for love itself. She likes to live her life quite freely and to bewitch men. She won't bother about her children and she won't stand being beaten. . . . As for envying her lot; no . . . I prefer my own."

Toudoritza gay again, the house was turned

upside down the very next day. One of the two great annual housecleanings—at Easter and Christmas—was now due. Everybody was delighted when the girl who had been heartbroken the day before, now put her hands on her hips and cried:

"Come along, my friends! Father Christmas is almost here! Whitewash! Clay! And be a little quicker about it too, please."

"Bravo, Toudoritza, bravo!"

They devoured her with kisses. They bore her aloft in triumph. They bombarded each other with balls of powdery snow. Patroutz cried:

"A brand and a coal, speak on, my lad!"

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We emptied two rooms, heaping up the furniture in a third room.

In the middle of the hall, we poured three wheelbarrowsful of clay, yellow as saffron, and

a wheelbarrowful of horse dung with water on top of them; I was entrusted with the job of trampling the clay on the floor of the rooms while Toudoritza whitewashed the walls and sang at the top of her lungs. She had put on a lot of old clothes of her mother's; her face and hair were wholly hidden under the great kerchief which revealed only her lovely eyes; and, armed with a long-handled brush, she covered walls and ceilings with that layer of bluish chalk which makes the joy and health of a Roumanian peasant and with which the Balkan villages alone are acquainted. The daubing done, we turned our attention to the ground. The time to smoke a pipe in and Toudoritza's skilful hand had smoothed it flat as a table. Then she stepped back to admire her work. . . .

For the space of a week, we lived a life of vagabonds, sleeping here one night, there another, wherever we could, eating at random in the atmosphere of a Turkish bath, whose steam, which smelled of chalk and dung, stung our nostrils.

At last the floor, walls and ceiling having been done over from one end to the other of the house, the furniture was put back in place; holiday carpets were spread on the ground; counterpanes and huge towels, all of woven linen and silk, came out from chests in an avalanche, and were lovingly laid out to decorate a bed, a window, a mirror or a picture, after which Toudoritza forbade us all to set foot in the "holiday rooms."

The same cleaning was done in almost every house in the village, wherever there was a girl of marriageable age. The others too put their best foot forward to pay honor to Father Christmas, each according to his means. And how melancholy the lot of the "poor devils glued to the soil," who had but their sighs with which to celebrate their Lord's Nativity!

But whether upon joyous well-being or upon heart-rending melancholy, the same snow fell ceaselessly during whole days and nights, indifferent to good, indifferent to evil. Swept in the beginning, then piled up in long banks, it

continued patiently its peaceful work of burial, stifling cries of joy and of grief alike in the same tomb. We no longer saw men leading cattle to the watering-place or women passing the time of day over a fence, or children, or dogs, either, for the snow rose higher than a man. Every noise fell asleep. Every black spot had disappeared from the fields and the village, swallowed up in the deluge of whiteness. The smoking roofs and the branches of the trees, even, were scarcely distinguishable from this ocean of white silence. Only the brown mass of the manor-house, its dim lights and its happiness built upon the wretchedness of others, were to be seen day and night, away up there on the hill, defying a grave-digging sky and a dying earth.

It was in such weather that Saint Andrew's Night fell, the holiday when the young peasant girl questions her fate about the husband it holds in store for her. The test is risky, sometimes macabre. A little before midnight, she must stand, completely nude and with her hair loosed,

before a looking-glass illumined by two candles. Then, looking straight into the depths of the glass, she sees the man destined for her pass by, young or old, handsome or repulsive, city dweller or plowman. If he is dead, he passes in the shape of a skeleton, his coffin on his back; then the young girl falls to the ground in a faint. If destiny refuses to reveal him clearly in the mirror, she must, clad only in her shirt, go out into the courtyard and count, as she turns her back to them, nine stakes in the enclosure. She then marks the ninth with a sign and returns to examine it on the morrow; her future husband will be like this stake, fresh or worm-eaten, smooth or knotted, very straight or doubled-up.

Through prudence, Toudoritza did not question the mirror, but she went out to mill through the snow with hands and feet, shuddering for an eternity until she found her ninth stake. None but herself ever knew what this stake looked like. But I, for my part, knew how beautiful Toudoritza was, with her hair falling over her white

shirt, as she slipped through the night like a ghost, whilst I looked at her from my window and listened to the woolly murmur of the falling snow.

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A harsh winter followed. To begin with, Christmastide was sad. Before so many cold hearths the rejoicing of those who had a pig to kill was very meagre. And although, through the charity of some neighbor, a quarter of meat could nevertheless be found, that day, on the board of the disinherited, Christmas was no less lamentable.

From New Year on, famine raged over the countryside. More than two hundred families saw their last ration of flour exhausted. Certain among them sold their beast of burden, an ox, a horse or a milch-cow. Others, hoping to find help, were forced in the end to kill the beast, which could no longer stand up. But the greater

part of the cattle died of starvation, after having gnawed the last stalk of corn, the rack, and the beams of the stables. Sleighs were to be seen every day bearing out of the village carcasses which packs of dogs immediately devoured.

Then a long beggary was organized; the beggary of children who went from house to house to ask for what remained when the flour had been sifted. They asked for nothing more than that.

"Flour! Flour!" they moaned, tottering, hideous. People gave, they shared what they had, more and more generously. But there were not many households able to give. Those who lived in ease or in riches—the mayor, the priest, a few wealthy peasants and above all, the boyar—quickly bolted their doors to the famished ones and remained pitilessly cloistered at home.

The boyar, as usual, was not at the manor; he lived in Bucharest. But an event brought him back at the very height of the desolation. This event was the apparition, in our neighborhood,

of bands of wolves, which scented the presence of the carcasses littering the countryside. The peasants at once rushed to his side, tore their hair, implored for and at last obtained a few bags of flour and a few stalks of corn.

I saw him on this visit for an instant, a jovial man in his fifties, greying at the temples; he looked like a man who dissipated, was proud to the point of bursting, strong as a bull and very firm indeed upon his feet.

"Get along! Get along!" he said boorishly to the peasants who besought him. "You are always ready to cry misery. This hasn't been a bad year for you alone!"

On the morrow, at daybreak, about thirty villagers, armed with guns, surrounded the little wood beside the manor-house. These men had been chosen by the boyar himself. Yet, without anyone knowing how it happened, after a few wolves had been shot down at the cutset, an unlucky shot tore the left shoulder of the master of the district.

"Someone mistook him for a wolf!" the peasants said.

Yes, but what hunter was after that wolf?

They sought him out. Innocent men were tortured to no purpose. When it came to a question of charging them, Tanasse stepped forward:

"I fired that shot."

"If only he dies!" Costaké said. "That will be one thistle less on our Baragan."

He did not die and the Baragan of Vlachka continued to bear its great thistle. By the same token, Three Hamlets lost its brave, unlucky Tanasse. They bound him hand and foot and dragged him before the boyar, who was already convalescing from his wound. The latter contented himself with saying to his farm-hands:

"Kill him."

Under the very eyes of the policeman, they dragged him out into the courtyard of the manor and trampled upon his breast until he died.

A few days after this crime, which was never punished, Mr. Cristea, the schoolmaster of the

township, a noble, good man, honest as the day, an indefatigable worker, returned to our midst. He had spent the summer holidays at Bucharest, at a relative's; he told us what he had seen at the capital.

"Bucharest is one vast market of luxuries," he said. "Our boyars bleed the nation in order to celebrate 'forty years of plenty and of the glorious reign of Charles I, of Hohenzollern, 1866-1906.' The words 'plenty,' 'prosperity' and 'glory' cover every wall. They have white-washed the façade of every house, put out flags and bunting everywhere. In the evening, it is a veritable fairyland. The *Filaret*, which was a fetid waste land, has become a dazzling quarter. That is *their* famous exposition, made up of white buildings, risen as miraculously as in a fairy tale. Everything is exhibited there, especially 'peasant's cottages,' a 'Roumanian village' such as we have never laid eyes on; families of peasants, plump and clad in national costumes, every one of whom must surely be a mayor; cattle,

incredibly beautiful, which is not the cattle that our dogs have just devoured. Millions thrown out of the window. During this time, the country is agonizing; and we are perishing away under their eyes. We are being assassinated. Yesterday they killed our Tanasse at a mere word. The other day I saw them driving off to the hospital with the unfortunate man who dared distribute among the peasants the Constitution, 'a subversive document,' said the policeman who felled him. Whither are we going? What will become of us?"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE first week of that unforgettable month of March, 1907 . . . "the year which followed the Exposition" as it is still called to-day. . . .

Ever since the middle of February, a steady and ever more beneficent warmth filled the heavens, thawed the snows, restored their murmur to the brooks, their piping to the birds, their buds to the trees and its fine black face to the earth. To the beasts it could bring only a certain quickening as it dispelled their numbness. Nothing, save its essential benefits and increase of despair. For the benefits of the sun falling upon a naked earth, upon naked trees, upon the water of rivers and upon famished villages, as winter passed, could not possibly

fill the hollow bellies of the men and of such beasts as still remained to them.

Peasants passed by, tottering as they walked; their gestures insane; their words a mewing; their eyes ferretting; wandering in bands over the countryside. Like men hallucinated, they looked at the fine black earth, for a long, long time; then they returned home, drunk with impotence: they had no cattle left, no strength, no seed to sow; not even the earth itself belonged to them now. Their state of mind was neither one of discouragement nor of revolt: it was a sort of delirium which intoxicated them. I saw men speak aloud to themselves, stamp up and down like children, cross their arms, rub their hands until they chafed them.

Suddenly, a piece of news struck the village like a bombshell. In Moldavia the peasants had burned the manor-house of the great Jewish farmer, Ficher. It was Mr. Cristea who read us this news from his paper. The gazette concluded:

This will teach the Jews to exploit the peasant to the last drop of his blood. Down with the Jews, down with the Jews!

The peasants who had been listening looked one another:

"What Jews? In our district there are none. And even elsewhere they are not allowed to be landed proprietors. No—the real people at fault are the boyar-landlords, not the farmer-tenants."

At these words, all eyes turned towards the manor.

Costaké said:

"There'll be plenty of trouble! The Baragan is beginning to set fire to its thistles."

We are standing in front of Stoïan's Inn. Villagers, in rags, ashen, doubled-up, followed one another feverishly, questioning, stuttering.

Then we noticed that this news was not the only event of the day, and that with it a second policeman had arrived. Of course both these

pillars of oppression stood by, well-fed, well-clothed, well-armed, somewhat taciturn, and especially grave. The ears of the master! Suddenly, the old one said to Costaké:

"You'd be doing better to keep your tongue in check, my friend!"

Then, to the teacher:

"You, Mr. Cristea, you read your newspapers *at home* in future, do you see?"

And to the peasants:

"What are you doing here? Go back to your homes. Mass meetings are forbidden."

"Why?" asked a man. "Has a state of siege been declared?"

The policeman fell upon the rash fellow.

"Ah, so you know the Constitution already, do you? Come here, my lad, and see if I don't teach you an article you know nothing about."

It was a tumultuous procession which followed to the Town Hall the man who had been arrested, yet the peasant nevertheless spent the night there learning the article in question. But this "ar-

ticle" pleaded with a tongue of fire in the great suit which was immediately instituted.

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On the morrow, very early in the morning, we were awakened by the howling of the beaten peasant, who, the moment he was released, began to run through the village, shouting:

"Help, help, good men, help. They have killed me."

Everyone rushed up to the square in front of the inn, where the man had fallen, his head black, unrecognizable. Toudoritza gave him the best of care; the innkeeper made him swallow a good glass of brandy. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched for the policemen. The latter took more than an hour to arrive. During this time the man who had been beaten recovered a little and told of the dreadful night he had spent at the police station. The peasants listened, pale. Then the policemen came up, swaggering and

sneering, their rifles across their backs, their revolvers on their hips:

"Murders! Hangmen!"

Utter silence. Thus apostrophized, they looked through the crowd, seeking to discover what woman's voice had flung these insults at them.

"What woman here insulted an officer in the exercise of his duties?" the old policeman asked.

A woman jostled her way through the crowd and stood in front of them:

"I did."

It was Stana, her hands on her hips, her face red as fire, her breast heaving, her eyes mad. Her enormous belly was thrust forward, pointed; it raised the front of her skirt very high.

"Oh, so it's you, you whore?" the policeman cried, as he walked in a fury towards her.

"Yes, yes, I. Murderers! Hangmen! It's I who say that to you; I, the mistress of your master."

And, clearing her throat, she fetched up a

great spit that struck the policeman square in the eye.

At the same moment, with a cry of "*Up and at 'em!*" suddenly the beaten peasant jumped on the back of the new policeman and threw him to the ground—which made his colleague promptly turn around, revolver in hand—but by this time, it was impossible to distinguish anything, save a mad mêlée in the midst of which six shots resounded and the pair of policemen lay flat on their backs in a pool of blood on the square, which emptied out in the twinkle of an eye.

For a few minutes nothing more was to be seen except children frozen immobile by terror, their eyes dull, glazed, brutish, their mouths gaping. Then the peasants reappeared, rising on all sides at the same time, each armed with a hunting piece or an axe, a scythe or a fork. They shouted:

"To the manor! To the Town Hall!"

The mob swung down to the Town Hall, which was on the road to the manor.

Costaké and Toudoritza each took down a gun

from the wall; there were four in the house.

"Stay here, in the name of God! Do not meddle in this madness!" the others cried to them.

But they were already far away by then. We followed them, Tom Toothless, Red-head Elie and I.

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The sun was beaming as in April; a vapor rose from the earth.

We caught up with the crowd in front of the Town Hall, where they were howling:

"The Mayor! The Mayor!"

The mayor appeared, but through the garden-door, on horseback and half-naked. He sped like an arrow in a direction opposite to that of the manor. A few other rich peasants rode ahead of him. Seeing this, two rebels, armed with the dead policemen's rifles, shot at the fugitives but missed them; then the rebels sacked the Town Hall and started running up to the manor.

In front of the church, the priest rose suddenly, crucifix in hand, trying to bar the way, spreading his arms, and, with his eyes popping out of his head, crying:

"Stop; you are damned. Stop in the name of the Lord! Hell will be your share in Paradise."

"To the devil with you, your hell and your paradise."

They bowled him over and rushed on.

A woman, on the side of the road, raised her arms, crying:

"O God, our Lord! Come to our help! What a malediction! What a curse!"

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The manor was surrounded by a wall, its door bolted. They knew that the boyar had left with his family a long time ago. In the courtyard, not a stir. Only the dogs, as numerous and large as wolves, ran about on the other side of the wall, barking furiously.

The crowd took its place in front of the door, shouting:

"Land! Seed! Cattle!"

The manager appeared on the balcony, calm but pale, and said, in a trembling voice, amid a general silence:

"I can do no more than I do every spring. . . ."

Deafening cries cut short his words:

"No, no. Enough, enough! We've had enough of it! We want our land."

The boyar's man stretched forth his hand to command attention.

"How do you want me to divide land which does not belong to me? Only the boyar can do so; don't talk like children, for God's sake!"

We understood that he knew nothing of what had just occurred in the village, but, at that moment, we were surprised to see long columns of smoke rising over the Town Hall and the Mayor's house, which stood next to it.

"Good God, you're burning the Town Hall,"

the manager screamed, holding his head between his hands.

"Land! Land! Give us back our land!"

"Let me go to the next township and telegraph to the boyar, asking his permission to divide up the land."

"Right he is!" said a peasant. "The land's not his. Let him go and tell the boyar to authorize him to divide it up."

"Right! Right!" said the rebels. "Let him go quickly."

The messenger immediately jumped on a horse and went out, clearing a path through the mob that blocked the road. The great massive wooden portal swung back shut in the face of the crowd. And at once Costaké struck his forehead:

"We're idiots," he cried. "The scoundrel has tricked us; he'll telegraph, sure enough, to Giurgiu, to get armed help."

The peasants trembled with anger as they heard this. All their glances bore upon the horseman riding away in the distance.

"Besides," Costaké added, "the Mayor and his friends have gone before him. The soldiers will be here this evening."

"Then let's take whatever's at hand," someone cried: "corn, meal, flour, fodder!"

"Ay, let's take that, anyhow," the peasants agreed.

This was the signal for the attack on the manor.

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They did not stand upon ceremony. Among the crowd were some women with bottles of paraffin. They sprinkled the doorway; the flames wrapped it about. In the silent suspense that followed, a clamor rose in the manor; there was a tramp of feet; then eight farm-hands appeared on the gallery above us; two salvos rang out and twice a hale of shot sowed death and despair among us. Elie, the red-head, fell at my side, dead. Costaké and Toudoritza managed to escape with a few slight wounds in their fingers. As for Yonel and me, we were unscathed.

In the crowd, five were killed and many wounded.

Then rage knew no bounds. The manor invaded, each did as he pleased after the eight farm-hands who had fired upon us were all massacred. To seize these men, the mob broke down every locked door and searched from cellar to attic. Two among them who had escaped into the fields were pursued, caught and gutted with pitchforks. But in this desperate struggle, three more of our men lost their lives.

Nothing was done to the other servants. They were allowed to flee into the world, followed, shortly after, by the manager's wife and his two little girls. The latter left in a carriage, their tears mingling with those of the peasant women who were mourning their dead.

Then the farm was sacked and devastated. While, in the courtyard, they piled up provisions, in the apartments they gave themselves up to a systematic destruction. Several men were demolishing the master's desk with axes, Costaké among them. Toudoritza and other women were

accomplishing the same task in the mistress' rooms. I happened to be there just as they were falling upon the drawing-room. Here was an amazing scene. Stana, alone, horrible to behold, smashed with axe and hand at a piano which was no more than a heap of tinware and wood. We surrounded her, a little frightened at her fury. Toudoritza said:

"Once, I wished you were dead! Now I wish to embrace you."

And embrace her she wished, but the other, without hearing, continued to lay on, smashing and hammering uselessly. With each gasp she gave as she strained, she stuttered something incomprehensible and her hair streamed over her eyes. The sweat poured down her face.

I grew afraid and went off to see what was happening in the other portions of the building. I fell upon a knot of little boys and girls, Tom Toothless at their head, who were robbing a great room filled with toys. All the toys in all the world! They filled their arms with them: teddy-

bears, horses, dolls with their furniture, locomotives with tracks and coaches, boxes of soldiers, little carriage, sailing ships, all manner of toys. While I was chatting with them, Stana passed like a whirlwind, a harpy, dishevelled, her great belly shaking.

"Look out for her!" someone cried out. "She's crazy!"

We took refuge on the gallery-balcony, from where we saw the boyar's fine teams go their way to the village—about ten carts drawn by milk-white oxen with huge horns. They had laden on everything; sacks full of meal, flour and grain; fodder, hay and oats; salted pork, hams, sausages, game; a whole cart filled with only bottles of wine and a barrel of brandy. They had even taken firewood with them.

Seated on the back of the cart at the head of the procession and bumping up and down against each other, women wept over the corpses of their husbands.

We were busy watching this exodus, when a

detonation shook the entire manor, breaking the very windows. A great cloud, black as tar, filled the courtyard, then the flames enveloped the outlying buildings where there were the stores of benzine. We rushed away, fast as our legs could carry us, forgetting our toys and everything else. As we crossed the courtyard, I saw Toudoritza, leaning against the wall, blinded, dazed, shouting without cease to the panic-stricken peasants:

"Let out the horses and cows. Open the henhouse!"

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It was noon when we reached the village, where the confusion, the cries, the tears, the bustle to and fro gave an idea of what must have been the panic of our villagers in the days when the refugees fled before the Turk. At the sight of the manor in flames—an immense blaze which made the horses rear—the peasants ran away, striking their heads with their fists:

"They will kill us. They will shoot the lot of us like dogs."

Mr. Cristea thought the same thing.

"Yes, we will be massacred. . . . Especially as now it's no longer a question of 'Jews' farms,' but ten districts in open revolt. As there's only one Jewish manor out of a hundred blazing, the army has been called out. That is to-day's news, my friend, and news that is food for thought. The boyars will be pitiless."

The boyars were pitiless.

A yellowish luminous dusk fell slowly upon the ruined manor, still black and smoking, like the vengeance hovering in the air. The dark shapes of the cattle which had escaped from the fire and were wandering over the crest of the hill loomed up against the sky.

In the village, men were eating, drinking, chatting in the middle of the square, among the unharnessed oxen and the heavily laden carts. The priest and the families of the richer peasants

had fled, taking what they needed in their wagons. That, too, was food for thought. But, succulent victuals helping, qualms were quelled and tears dried; all spoke rather of the dividing up of the land. Through the darkness which made their voices resonant, I heard a peasant cry out:

"The fields of my grandfather stretched out over yonder by Giurgui."

"Ha! you've your eye on the best land!" they answered.

From time to time, a lamentation rose from afar; a wife or a mother was weeping as she sat over her dead:

"A-o-leo Gheor-ghé Gheor-ghé, they killed you, killed you . . ."

Someone said:

"Nobody saw Stana after?"

"It must have been she who set fire to the benzine. Poor woman!"

Suddenly a flash splashed across the night, a roar echoed over the hill and a shell fell upon the carts.

Thus began the bombardment of Three Hamlets, proving to the peasant that it is not permitted everyone to stuff himself full of food.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN our wagon, after a thousand difficulties, finally emerged on the highroad, the dazzling dawn and a flight of crows saluted us upon the horizon. Then Costaké began to drive like a madman, never ceasing for a moment to beat the horses.

This flight from the village, in the dead of night, under shell fire, I shall always call a flight from hell. For a moment we despaired of success. The shells fell everywhere. The burning straw of the roofs of cottages aflame flew upon every wind. No one paid the least attention to the corpses they struck at every step, but we all struggled with the living people who clutched at us and clung to us, impeding our flight.

Toudoritza and Costaké's wife, with Patroutz

in her arms, were all three killed by the same shell. The others of the household disappeared with those who fled across garden and field. Having remained with Yonel and me, Costaké harnessed the cart, after he had crammed into a sack a few provisions and the little money he had left.

"We'll venture all, my lads," he said, sadly. "If we get through, we'll go to Hagiéni. But it will be hard, for it's the thistles running after us this time. And they're aflame. Well, more's the pity . . . we willed it! . . ."

Just as he bent down to embrace his three dead, our house began to burn, in its turn.

"There is your grave!" he said to his three dead ones.

Then, for the rest of the night, all we did was joggle along the most impossible roads and fight desperately against the fugitives who clustered about our wagon.

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After about a mile of easy going on a fine road, the horses stopped of their own accord, exhausted, foaming at the mouth. A great hill hid the hell of Three Hamlets from view. The bombardment had ceased. Costaké let go of the reins, rubbed down the horses with straw and sank back in the depths of the wagon, his face buried in the hay.

All about us stretched the countryside, newly plowed. The wagtails jumped from furrow to furrow, wagging their tails; from the heights of the sky, a lark trilled down upon our heads.

We looked at each other, Tom Toothless and I, without daring to utter a word. It was no longer terror we felt, but a great need of sleeping. Never would we have believed that the wretchedness of the peasants and the cruelty of the landlords could bring about such horrors. Our eyes were full of tears at the pity of it; the odor of blood and powder still smarted in our nostrils; our heads rang with every imaginable cry of despair.

That business of the thistles!

Now we believed it was finished. Alas, it was not by any means finished.

A sound of galloping hoofs drew us suddenly out of our apathy. Costaké, standing in the wagon, his reins in his hand, listened for a moment to make sure whence the sound was coming.

"It's cavalry!" he murmured. "They are behind the hill."

And, striking his horses: "Giddop, roans! Here come the thistles that stick fast to our flesh."

These were my friend's last words.

Three horsemen appeared at the turning of the hill down which we had just come. Invisible to them, we were looking out from the depths of the wagon, lying there crouched and huddled, barely able to breathe. But our poor friend, not suspecting perhaps what a target his back offered them, was whipping his horses and laying on with all his might. They plunged forward in

pursuit; we saw them halt fifty paces away, shoulder their rifles and fire. As our wagon hurtled forward, I felt Costaké's body fall over the side. And that was all, for I lost consciousness while our horses galloped on.

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I must have remained unconscious for quite a while. When I returned to my senses, a terrible headache was making me moan. Yonel was driving the horses at a walk in open country, though already a village hove in sight. My companion was weeping.

"Did you know they had killed Costaké?" he asked.

"I know he fell from the cart."

"He's dead! I went to have a look at him."

"And the soldiers?"

"The Devil take them! They disappeared at once. Then I stopped. And now, where are we going?"

I did not answer. We continued along our way, mute.

At the cross-roads, we met an old peasant, coming on foot from the village; he asked us where we came from. We told him about the massacre at Three Hamlets. He was terrified, anguished.

"Woe betide us! There's been an uprising at our place, too; don't go there, you'll be arrested. They arrest almost all those whom they do not kill."

"Did they bombard you?"

"No, not with cannon, but they are shooting down hundreds of unfortunates whom the informers point out as instigators. And, it's a dreadful thing, they make them dig their own graves first. It's the end of the world, children. *They* are doing as they please with us. It's like the Baragan."

"They never killed so many people on the Baragan," I said. "We are from yonder; we would like to return there."

"Do you want to go toward Ialomitza? Then take this little path to your left, up to the main road; then, bearing on the right, you'll reach the Argesh Bridge. You can go downstream to Radovanu. And God be with you!"

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Through roads filled with patrols, we reached Radovanu in the evening, dead with fatigue and fear. The country was quiet, or they had already quieted it. In any case, we were happy to be able to go straight to an inn, to put our horses to stable and to lock ourselves up, for a whole long week, without loosing our tongues.

But if we had no desire to speak, we could not help but hear. And from morning to night, all people spoke of was horrors; from one end of the country to the other it was the same story: executions without trial, invariably upon personal denunciation. Wretchedness, famine, oppression, were no longer the issue, but only

"Jews" and "instigators." They it was who had roused the country. To avoid having soldiers fire upon their own kin, the government sent them very far from their native districts to shoot down the kinsmen of comrades who had been sent elsewhere. Those who refused to fire upon anyone, regardless, were themselves shot down or jailed. The prisons were overcrowded. And prisoners were executed every day.

The day after we arrived, a policeman came to the inn, escorting a young man who appeared to be a student. He had been so unmercifully beaten that he could not stand up. The peasants hastened to pour him a drink, for he wept with thirst. The policeman warned them:

"Mustn't pity him. He's a 'dangerous *istigator.*' And a Jew."

Beaten to death as he was, the young man rose.

"Yes, I'm a Jew!" he cried, "but I'm not an *'istigator.'* It's your own slavery, peasants, that's the *'istigator.'* Remember the prophetic words of the great Cosbuc, who is neither a Jew

nor an '*istigator,*' in his poem: *We wish the earth:*

*To whatsoever ends our God many shape us,*
*If ever your blood and not our earth we crave,*
*Then, be ye Christs, ye never shall escape us,*
*Neither in life, nor death, nor in the grave.*

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Having lived through such tragic hours, at an age when other children still play, I could bear it no longer. My heart was breaking. And especially any mention of shootings, executions, and tortures made my head ache terribly. So on the morning of our departure from Radovanu, while I was trying not to hear the peasants repeating the same horrors, I caught the last words of a story someone was telling. It froze my blood:

"Poor Marine was in no way at fault. A former fisherman at Laténi, he was working here and there, playing his flute as he went along. They stopped him because they said he *had every-*

*where been singing a village song about a porridge leaner than lucre and a cook defending it with a club against the attacks of the wee 'uns.* So, of course, he was an instigator. They shot him."

"I think it's your father they are speaking of!" Yonel said.

I thought so too, but I could feel nothing save that my breast was slowly being drained. I tottered, I reeled, I went to throw myself back into the wagon like a cat which has been clubbed. Much later, while my comrade was whipping up the horses, making the wagon fly among the sunny fields, I gripped his arm and asked:

"Where are we going, Yonel?"

"Into the world, Mataké, with the thistles at our heels!"